

NEW HEROINES OF THE DIASPORA: READING GENDERED IDENTITY IN SOUTH ASIAN DIASPORIC FICTION

by

LOPA BANERJEE

submitted in accordance with the requirements
for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

in the subject

ENGLISH

at the

UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH AFRICA

SUPERVISOR: PROF P D RYAN

JUNE 2011

Summary

This thesis looks at literature by two South Asian, diasporic writers, Jhumpa Lahiri and Monica Ali, as a space where creative, cross- cultural and independent identities for diasporic women might be created. The central claim of the thesis is that diasporic migration affects South Asian women in particular ways. The most positive outcome is that these women adopt new trans-border identities but that these remain shaped by class, culture and gender. Hence a working class milieu such as the one depicted by Monica Ali, leads to an immigrant, ghetto-ised, community-based identity, located solely in the land of adoption, with return or travel to the homeland no longer possible. However, the milieu imagined in Jhumpa Lahiri's text, a middle-class, suburban environment, creates a solitary, transnational identity, lived between countries, where travel between the land of birth and the land of adoption remains accessible.

Key Terms

Diaspora; Gender; Women; Cross-cultural; Agency and identity; South Asian; Working-class; Middle-class; England; USA; Immigrant; Trans-border; Homeland; Adopted land; Class; Community; Home and exile; Food and familiarity; Marriage and love; Choice and voice

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Summary

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Chapter 1

New Diasporic Narratives: Women's writing and the shaping of the diasporic imagination

The term 'diaspora' signifies the political as well as individual consequences of cultural alienation, a strong sense of exile and a terrible reality of homelessness resulting in the loss of geo (physical) boundaries... In [the] diaspora's desperate attempt to grapple with the truth and extent of the loss, there is always a constant effort to build the lost boundaries in the host space. (Komalesha 2004:151)

This dissertation explores literature by two South Asian women diasporic writers, as an arena where creative, cross-cultural and contemporary identities for diasporic women might be created. It examines the debut novels by writers Jhumpa Lahiri and Monica Ali, to suggest that South Asian diasporic fiction by women may indeed be the space which leads to a re-articulation of the nature of South Asian women's diasporic identity. The central claim of this dissertation, based on a reading of the novels, *Brick Lane* and *The Namesake*, by Monica Ali and Jhumpa Lahiri respectively, is that diasporic migration affects South Asian women in particular ways, differently from men, the established leaders of this discourse. The most positive outcome is that these women adopt new, independent, cross-border identities but that these remain shaped by class, culture and gender.

Migration discourses are not usually approached through a female gaze. This dissertation contributes towards scholarship on female narratives of migration by exploring how traditional (male) immigrant discourses of alienation and loss can be positively subverted by women, liberating them from familiar norms and allowing them the space to interrogate their roles and create new, individual identities.

In particular, the dissertation claims that class and location fundamentally affect identity creation. In attempting to unravel the complex knot of race, class and location, I suggest that a working-class, communitarian milieu, such as that depicted by Monica Ali, leads to an immigrant, ghetto-ised, diasporic identity, located solely in the land of adoption, with return or travel to the homeland no longer possible. On the other hand, the milieu of

Jhumpa Lahiri's text, a middle-class, suburban environment, creates a solitary, transnational identity, lived between countries, where travel between the land of birth and the land of adoption remains accessible. The dissertation deliberates on the difference between the conceptualization of an *immigrant* identity versus a *transnational* one. While both these concepts relate to contemporary realities of shifting national boundaries, multiple locations of home, multiracial and multicultural identities, *transnational* refers to the conjoining of the local with the global. Bill Ashcroft (1995:319) suggests that the concept of transnational is "diasporic aggregation of flows and convergences, both within and without state boundaries". In his conception, transnational subjects live in the interstices of one or more bounded territories, travelling easily between them, and through their experiences de- and re-territorializing dominant definitions of identity and space. In contrast, *immigrant* is seen as an identity paradigm characterized by "movement, displacement, relocation" (319). The immigrant does not have the ability to move between homes and has a more fraught relationship with 'home' and 'homeland', leading to prevailing themes in diaspora discourse of absence, loss, unhoming and melancholia. Diasporic writers Ali and Lahiri do, however, offer a more creative view of the immigrant woman and explore the concept of recreating 'home' as a transformative process resulting from the geographical movement of migration. In their discourses of diaspora, both *transnational* and *immigrant* offer the benefits of a double belonging.

This study explores the idea of migration and identity creation through a literary lens. It looks at the literary representation of diasporic identity in the works of Jhumpa Lahiri and Monica Ali, and through a comparison of their works shows the creation of two different sorts of diasporic identities, based on differences in class and location. As South Asian diasporic women, Ali and Lahiri present fiction whose settings reflect their own perceptual fields, influenced by their (trans)location. Through the characters of their migrant protagonists, they present a conception of identity that is explicitly geographically and culturally plural.

In my reading of Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake* and Monica Ali's *Brick Lane*, I argue that men and women experience migration differently and further that women's identities

vary by class and location. Thus, this dissertation shows that the upper middle-class protagonist of Lahiri's *The Namesake*, who lives in suburban America, forms an *individualist* identity, while the working-class protagonist of Ali's *Brick Lane*, who lives in London, forms a *communitarian* identity. These identities have profound implications for the two women who stand at the centre of these two novels, enabling different possibilities of community and belonging on the one hand, and solitariness and autonomy on the other.

Theorizing Immigration and Diaspora

The diaspora rewrites home and presents new identities and subjectivities emerging within a confluence of heterogeneous cultures. (Capello 2004:57)

Migration has long been part of human history and has always entailed the creation of multiple affiliations and identities. In an interview with Susheila Nasta, Salman Rushdie refers to the process of migration as “the actual condition of change through movement” (Nasta 2002:149). The poet Meena Alexander speaks of it as:

A harmony that underwrites a poetics of dislocation where multiple places are jointed together, the whole lit by desire that recuperates the past, figures forth the future. (2004:15)

Homi K. Bhabha, one of the seminal scholars of diaspora theory, in his influential and widely disseminated essay, ‘Border Lives: The Art of the Present’, argues that:

It is the trope of our times to locate the question of culture in the realm of the *beyond*....The ‘beyond’ is neither a new horizon, nor a leaving behind of the past...in the *fin de siècle*, we find ourselves in the moment of transit where space and time cross to produce complex figures of difference and identity, past and present, inside and outside, inclusion and exclusion. (1994:1-2)

Bhabha is one of the originators of the contemporary discourse of ‘narrative’ constructions that arise from the ‘hybrid’ interactions emerging from transnational existence and cosmopolitan consciousness:

It is in the emergence of the interstices – the overlap and displacement of domains of difference – that the intersubjective and collective experiences of *nationness*, community interest, or cultural value are negotiated....Terms of cultural engagement,

whether antagonistic or affiliative, are produced performatively. The representation of difference must not be hastily read as the reflection of *pre-given* ethnic or cultural traits set in the fixed tablet of tradition. The social articulation of difference...is a complex, on-going negotiation that seeks to authorize cultural hybridities that emerge in moments of historical transformation. (Bhabha 1994:2-3)

‘Diaspora’ has traditionally been understood as a yearning for a lost home. Steven Vertovec explains:

The overall Jewish history of displacement has embodied the longstanding, conventional meaning of diaspora. Martin Baumann (1995) indicates that there have been at least three inherent, and rather different referential points with respect to what we refer to as the Jewish (or any other group’s) historical experience ‘in the diaspora’. That is, when we say something has taken place ‘in the diaspora’ we must clarify whether we refer to (a) the *process* of becoming scattered, (b) the *community* living in foreign parts, or (c) the *place* or geographic *space* in which the dispersed groups live. The kind of conceptual muddle that may arise from the failure to distinguish these dimensions with regard to historical Jewish phenomena continues to plague the many emergent meanings of the notion of diaspora.

(Vertovec 2000:2-3)

Vertovec further elaborates that in the contemporary context, interpretations of migration as loss of home and familiars are no longer current and instead have given way to ideas of diaspora as communities of simultaneously local and pluralistic identities, ethnic and transnational affiliations and celebrations of cosmopolitanism:

Diaspora discourse has been adopted to move collective identity claims and community self-ascriptions beyond multiculturalism... The alternative agenda – now often associated with the notion of diaspora – advocates the recognition of hybridity, multiple identities and affiliations with people, causes and traditions outside the nation state of residence. (5)

In the context of current diaspora discourse, led by scholars such as Bhabha and Vertovec, ‘diaspora’ can be viewed today as a ‘place’ which can create multiplicities of

cosmopolitanism, produced and reproduced through communities of people, moving physically or conceptually between spaces, albeit through a chaotic order. In such a context 'diaspora' may be a socio-cultural label applied to populations that, intentionally, do not occupy conventional territory. They may thus be considered 'de-territorialized' or 're-territorialized' when they move from an original land to an adopted one and build expatriate or ethnic enclaves in the land of their adoption. Their emotional, social and cultural affiliations transect borders of nation-states and, indeed, it is not an overstatement to say that they form global communities across geographical, political, social and cultural boundaries.

Vertovec refers to diaspora as 'social form' and a 'type of consciousness' (7). He suggests that diasporic populations retain a collective memory or vision of their original homeland and continue to relate personally or vicariously to that vision. It follows that their conscious identity is importantly defined by the existence of such a relationship. Extrapolating on this idea of diaspora as social consciousness, contemporary feminist diasporic scholar, Chandra Talpade Mohanty, speaks of a 'feminism without borders' in which diaspora is border-crossing. She argues for a trans-cultural, feminist identity that seeks:

The simultaneous plurality and narrowness of borders and the emancipatory potential of crossing through, with, and over these borders. (Mohanty 2003:2)

To these scholars diaspora does not imply universality but the movements of ideas, images and people, who carry ideas and memories with them. The notion of diaspora as a concept of 'emigration' (a voluntary movement away from an original centre and towards a specific chosen destination, based on the hope for a better life in that destination), rather than 'dispersion' (forced removal from a locus, implying lack of choice and resulting in widespread wandering, as in the dispersion of the Jewish peoples, the original Diaspora), has evolved to signify an identity space that words such as 'exile', 'migrant', 'immigrant', 'alien', 'refugee' and 'foreigner' cannot claim. In its contemporary usage, 'diaspora' indicates movement and dynamism, origin and belonging, community and culture, along with loneliness and isolation, collective nostalgia and community memory. The term 'diaspora'

itself refers to the casting of an identity and suggests simultaneously a history and a route into the future in a way that is denied to terms like 'refugee', 'migrant', 'foreigner' or 'alien'.

Transnational versus Immigrant

The different experiences of diaspora entail the possibility of selecting different ideas, ways of being, modes of interaction and self-presentation. The deliberate crafting of cultural microcosms and conscious assigning of identity space leads to articulation of ideas such as *transnationalism* and *immigrant* and is a major theme in the writings of diasporic authors.

Alison Blunt, in her study on transnational geographies quotes Katharyne Mitchell to say that: Cultural geographies of transnationality examine the embodied movements and practices of migrants...and analyse these flows with respect to national borders and the cultural constructions of nation, citizen and social life. (Mitchell, cited in Blunt 2007:687)

Peggy Levitt (2001) further suggests that transnationalism is possible when streams of migration are continuous and circular, and allow the elements of the homeland, continuously to infuse immigrant life. In other words, a *transnational* identity is possible when ideas and people can flow back and forth and when the home identity of immigrants is not locked to the time when they left their country of origin. An *immigrant* identity is created when immigrants do not have the economic and social capital to be mobile, and/or adequate access to technology, and feel unable to achieve full social membership in the land to which they have emigrated.

Taking its cue from Ehrkamp and Leitner who remind us that, "diversity and differences among migrants mediate migrants' transnational ties and their understandings and practices of citizenship" (Blunt 687), this study suggests that social location, specifically class, affects whether one experiences migration as an immigrant or transnational subject. It also argues that transnational subjects develop more autonomous and individualistic identities while immigrant subjects develop communitarian identities, both of which carry with them great benefits but also some costs.

Writing the Diaspora: A gendered 'reworlding'

In 'Imaginary Homelands' Salman Rushdie writes:

The word 'translation' comes, etymologically, from the Latin for 'bearing across'. Having been borne across the world, we are translated men. It is normally supposed that something always gets lost in translation; I cling, obstinately, to the notion that something can also be gained. (1999:16)

There are of course differences in men's writing of the immigrant experience from women's, so it is not a coincidence that Rushdie says, "Having been borne across the world, we are translated *men*" (emphasis mine). This is because the particular forms of loss and yearning articulated in much of diasporic literature relate to the experience of men as men, as sons, husbands and fathers. Famously for Naipaul, writing about the Caribbean, the yearning may be for the ability to build a house for one's family (*A House for Mr. Biswas*) or, for Hanif Kureishi, the frustrated search for upward mobility in the British class structure (*My Beautiful Laundrette*). Lately however, South Asian diasporic women writers, are writing fiction which reflects the lives of South Asian diasporic women. This writing creates an arena within which the conventional discourse of the rootless male diasporic, can be re-looked at, as a journey across borders (physical but also social and cultural) for the female diasporic, creating a realm of dynamic dialogue within which it is possible to interrogate gender roles and re-interpret them to promote a gendered vision of diasporic society.

This dissertation examines the shared diasporic sensibilities but separate thematic concerns of two women diasporic writers – Jhumpa Lahiri, an American of Indian descent and Monica Ali, a British citizen of Bangladeshi origin. Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake* is set among Indian middle-class immigrants in the United States whereas Monica Ali's *Brick Lane* is set among Bangladeshi working-class immigrants in the United Kingdom. The dissertation analyzes their fiction with the view that literature produced out of diasporic experiences constructs imagined realities that can influence, or at least create a prism to examine, lived realities. The two novels under study focus on women who are freed through the experience of immigration and are thus able to create non-traditional, contemporary, trans-cultural and global identities.

In the two novels under review, I explore ideas of borders and the borderless as they are expressed by the authors. I argue that the simultaneous containment and porousness of

borders, and the idea of borderlessness that the two novels explore, offer an arena within which it is possible to construct creative, cosmopolitan and plural identities for diasporic women. My view is that the traditional immigrant discourses of alienation and loss can be subverted by women, liberating them from established norms and allowing them the space to review the social fault lines, conflicts, differences, fears and challenges that make up their traditional roles, thereby interrogating the very roles themselves.

Mohanty refers to the “emancipatory potential” of border crossings, suggesting that “a feminism without borders must envision change and social justice” (2). This idea is relevant when discussing emerging identity constructs which are manifestly without borders and thus without the lines of familial and cultural demarcation and division. At the same time, this dissertation argues that the nature of both the border crossing and its aftermath vary greatly with rooted experiences of class, and thus the nature of the new freedoms vary as well.

Referring to “asymmetrical worlds” of hybridity, Bhabha speaks of Salman Rushdie’s *The Satanic Verses* as an example that “the truest eye may now belong to the migrant’s double vision” (7-8). To Bhabha, Rushdie’s immigrant is one who grapples with the choice between assimilation and isolation in the new location but also one who can dismantle these binaries and develop a hybrid subjectivity:

In his mythic being he has become the ‘borderline’ figure...that is not only a ‘transitional’ reality, but also a ‘translational’ phenomenon. The question is...whether ‘narrative invention’...becomes the figure of a larger possible [cultural] praxis. (320)

This idea of migration as translation promotes fictionalisation as the reworking of a universe, partly created but also partly real. Consequently, fiction appears in its space-creating function, in the sense that it creates new conceptual worlds and this is the opportunity that writers like Ali and Lahiri use to articulate a literary ‘reworlding’ for their protagonists. Bhabha explains ‘newness creation’ or ‘reworlding’ as follows:

This liminality of migrant experience is no less a transitional phenomenon than a translational one; there is no resolution to it because the two conditions are ambivalently enjoined in the ‘survival’ of migrant life. Living in the interstices...makes graphic a moment of transition...in which the very *writing* of...transformation becomes...visible. (321)

Malleable Identities: Women who migrate and transform

In the two novels discussed in this dissertation, Ali and Lahiri explore the lives of two ordinary South Asian diasporic women, Nazneen (*Brick Lane*) and Ashima (*The Namesake*), whose experience of migration causes them to interrogate their traditional roles. Their migration is propelled by their unquestioning acceptance of the social norms that define their destinies; but their quiet acquiescence is turbulently challenged by the overwhelming experience of their compulsive migration. Perhaps the most significant aspect that distinguishes narratives of male migration from female migration is choice. In the novels under consideration, the women are not the primary agents of emigration – the diasporic experience is one that is forced on them by the circumstances of their choiceless marriages – but they emerge, through this experience, as evocative symbols of a new and aspirational, more justly ordered society.

Chandra Talpade Mohanty argues that “being a woman has political consequences in the world we live in; that there can be unjust and unfair effects on women depending on our...marginality and/or privilege” (3). In this context, Ali and Lahiri propose that the absence of the boundaries of home, lost through exile, permits the vision for transformation and hence the creation of modern, contextual, identities. In ‘Representations of the Intellectual’, Edward Said argues that a condition of marginality, stemming from being an expatriate or exile, “frees you from having always to proceed with caution, afraid to overturn the applecart, anxious about upsetting fellow members of the same corporation” (Bayoumi and Rubin 2000:380). Jhumpa Lahiri and Monica Ali explore narratives of women who are freed through the experience of immigration from familiar but circumscribed constructs of home and identity. Estranged from the known comfort of traditional boundaries and constantly yearning for their lost home, Lahiri’s and Ali’s heroines tenaciously cling to the idea of creating a home such as they have known, but the omnipresence of foreignness and the necessity of grappling with its influence renders this act a creative reconstruction, liberating it from circumscribed limits. Lahiri and Ali use the territory of the literary text as an arena for

cultural production, to challenge notions of spatially rooted, homogeneous identities that conform and often constrict.

In referring to notions of 'home' Edward Said (2001:236) asks, "What must it be like to be completely at home?". Said understands 'home' as a conceptual and not literal space, an image, a placeholder for nostalgia. On the contrary, for women diasporics, home is literal, for they are tasked with the material and symbolic work of creating a new home in the new land. Hence, in the context of diaspora, current feminist scholarship has been "interested in the configuration of home, identity and community; more specifically, in the power and appeal of 'home' as a concept and desire, its occurrence as a metaphor" (Mohanty 2003: 85).

To explore the problematic of 'home', both Lahiri and Ali reconceptualize the relations between 'home' and 'identity'. The notion of home, while presented differently by the two authors, nevertheless undergoes a similar transformation in the two novels – from a clearly recalled, profoundly missed, physical space, to a nuanced, ambiguous, metaphorical state of mind. Writing on immigrant discourses of home, Helen Taylor says:

[Immigrant discourses] appear to be an ongoing negotiation between a pragmatic approach to daily life (in the West) and nostalgic and often painful memories of lost villages... The juxtaposition of the lost rural home and the urban context of exile magnifies memories...they hold onto the idealized memories of what was left behind as way of laying claim to the past and the future, in order to remember who they are. (Taylor 2005:2-4)

While this nostalgia for the lost 'home' is consistently reflected in the two novels under study, there is also in the texts a gradual move away from the purely personal experience of nostalgia to a more complex working out of the relationship between home, identity and community. These factors provide specificity for the narratives, moving them forward to:

The tension between two specific modalities: being home and not being home. 'Being home' refers to the place...within familiar, safe, protected boundaries; 'not being home' is a matter of realizing that home was an illusion of coherence...based on the exclusion of specific histories...even within oneself. (Mohanty 2003: 90)

In this context, viewing the changing identities of Ashima and Nazneen is not simply seeing them move from constraint to liberation but recognizing that "change has to do with the

transgression of boundaries...so carefully, so tenaciously, so invisibly drawn around...identity”(Mohanty 2003: 97).

For Lahiri’s and Ali’s heroines, the blueprints of their past remain with them always and so their histories are in constant flux. There is no linear progression in their recognition of their own identities or self; instead there is a slow and continuous expansion of what Mohanty calls the “constricted eye” (2003: 90). The two protagonists revisit and configure, continuously, their relationships with husbands, lover (in the case of Ali’s Nazneen), children, workmates and friends, in contexts that are foreign and for which they have no precedents to guide them. This constantly underlines the fundamentally relational nature of their identities and the plural reference points, which are in direct contrast to the assumption of the singular, fixed sense of self that they had grown up with.

For Lahiri and Ali, who can both lay claim to transnational, multicultural identities, the question of how to define ‘home’ for their women immigrants could be examined as a political one. The idea of ‘home’ encompasses notions ranging from fundamental concepts of enduring and determined traits to the post-modern assumption that ‘home’ is a construction, a series of self-narratives. As diasporics themselves these two authors grew up in two worlds simultaneously, inheriting their parents’ sense of exile and “the feeling that there was no single place to which I fully belonged” (Lahiri n.d.). Their construction of ‘home’ for their characters therefore, is influenced by their “struggle to come to terms with what it means to live here, to be brought up here, to belong and not belong here” (Lahiri n.d.).

To both Nazneen and Ashima the idea of home is self-defining and crucial to their experience of exile. The notion of home, to them, is simultaneously a geographical space, a location of memory, an historical space and an emotional and sensory space. Yet ultimately it is not the place where they were born nor the place where they grew up – it is the place where they are, metaphorically and consciously, at the end of the novels; and in that analysis their concept of home is linked to their construct of self and is, therefore, political.

The diasporic identity is often about choosing between selves. In other words, identity, in the process of diaspora, is transformed and translated into a new system of relationships that gives diasporans an alternative position from which to re-formulate their visions of the

local and global. My focus in this dissertation is to read the fictional territory of South Asian diasporic authors, Ali and Lahiri, so as to highlight the new engagements diasporic women are compelled to make, if only to survive. My perspective is that these new connections of community help them to negotiate identities, at first of endurance alone, but ultimately of renewal and empowerment. It is the 'leaving home', which stimulates new frameworks of engagement, interaction and ultimately, identity – something which could never have happened in the confines of the household in the homeland or village.

Salman Rushdie, in *Shame*, speaking of the immigrant or migrant says:

We have performed the act of which all men anciently dream, the thing for which they envy the birds; that is to say, we have flown...Look under your feet. You will not find gnarled growths spouting through the soles. Roots, I sometimes think, are a conservative myth designed to keep us in our places. (Rushdie 1984:90-91)

In recognizing that diasporic literature allows, in Benzi Zhang's words (2004:36), a "new vision of...permeable relations", one can view identity within the diaspora, as a place of engagement, challenge and dynamism, creating an opportunity for re-interpretation and allowing a transformative view of women in the diasporic discourse.

The following chapters articulate the argument of my dissertation:

Chapter 2: A textual reading of Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake*

My argument is that the novel demonstrates the circumstances through which diasporic migration can create transnational identities for women who are otherwise not the agents of migration. In this chapter I will present a brief synopsis of the novel followed by a textual analysis of the novel which will explore the various themes that build my argument. The themes that I will focus on are: class, space and location; community, love, romance and the relationships with husband and children; the protagonist's lack of voice and muteness; the circumstances which lead her to a recognition and expression of her agency; the strategies that she uses to deal with absence and loss; her dawning self reliance, at first as a coping mechanism but later leading to 'self-hood' and the development of an individual identity.

I will conclude the chapter by an analysis of how the novel creates possibilities for new diasporic and transnational gender identities.

Chapter 3: A textual reading of Monica Ali's *Brick Lane*

My argument is that the novel demonstrates the circumstances under which a particular kind of gendered immigrant identity is created. I will present a brief synopsis of the novel followed by a textual analysis to explore the various themes that build my argument. The themes are: class, space and location; community and friendships; the role of religion and how class and community contribute to the construction of a religious identity; love, desire and the relationship with husband and children; the lack of voice and the circumstances through which muteness is overcome and voice expressed; the struggle to endure, to adapt, to re-create identity and forge a new life; the role of the working class communitarian sisterhood and its influence in identity re-creation. I will conclude the chapter by summarizing how the novel through its literary form, supports the idea of a gendered immigrant identity.

Chapter 4: A comparison of the two novels

The chapter will underline the comparison of the two novels from the perspective of how the different class backgrounds of their heroines determine their engagement with their new homelands and how this engagement then influences the separate and similar identity discourses of the two women. I will compare and contrast the five to six themes and issues that I introduced and analyzed in the previous two chapters as means of establishing my argument about diasporic literature and identity creation. I will also draw attention to the differences in the novels and analyze the authors' use of stereotypes and other stylistic tropes, and how effective they are in each novel (in relation to the argument).

Chapter 5: Conclusion

This chapter will concentrate on the integration of textual analysis, conclusions drawn about diaspora, gender and class, and how the analysis of the novels supports my argument and contributes to the theory and literary criticism relevant to the novels.

Chapter 2

Borderlessness: The creation of the transnational in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake*

For being a foreigner, Ashima is beginning to realize, is a sort of lifelong pregnancy – a perpetual wait, a constant burden, a continuous feeling out of sorts. It is an ongoing responsibility, a parenthesis in what had once been ordinary life, only to discover that that previous life had vanished, replaced by something more complicated and demanding. (Lahiri 2004:49-50)

In her first novel, *The Namesake*, Jhumpa Lahiri uses the concept of the longed-for but irretrievably lost homeland to challenge the traditional construct of identity creation for one of her central characters, Ashima. The novel's protagonists all grapple with notions of shifting identity. But Ashima is the most vivid symbol of the argument that engagements of 'exile' can challenge the patriarchal and traditional constructs of 'home' to create new gender identities, in this case a contemporary, middle-aged, transnational woman.

In this chapter, I will present the view that while women like Ashima are not agents of diasporic migration and in fact follow their men as passengers, they do not remain passive in the land of adoption. In fact, they are compelled by their challenging circumstances of loneliness and isolation and the trauma of migration to build new and dynamic identities.

The Namesake begins in the 1960s and traverses a period until the 2000s. It is the story of a young Bengali girl, Ashima, who is uprooted from her native and beloved Calcutta, India, to be married off to a young and promising Bengali academic, Ashoke, in Boston, America. In the novel Ashima is not a diasporic by choice as her husband Ashoke is. As the dutiful and obedient daughter of middle-class Bengali parents living in Calcutta in the early 1960s, she enters marriage, "obediently but without expectation" (7). She marries the groom that her parents choose for her, grateful only that he is neither too old nor incapacitated (7). The marriage is arranged by the two sets of parents and Ashoke and Ashima exert little personal choice in the decision and barely meet each other prior to the marriage: "It was only after the betrothal that she'd learned his name" (9).

The marriage itself is a typically Bengali, hectic, noisy affair, full of people and family. Following their wedding, the two virtual strangers, Ashima and Ashoke Ganguli, leave Calcutta for the cold climes of Cambridge, Massachusetts in America where Ashoke is studying for his PhD. Here Ashima confronts the unfamiliar cold, the unexpected smallness of her cramped, three-roomed house and comes to know her husband:

Eight thousand miles away in Cambridge, she has come to know him. In the evenings she cooks for him, hoping to please... By now she has learned that her husband likes his food on the salty side... At night, lying beside her in bed, he listens to her describe the events of her day. (10)

The apartment consists of three rooms all in a row without a corridor... It is not at all what she had expected... The apartment is drafty during winter, and in summer, intolerably hot. The thick glass windowpanes are covered by dreary dark brown curtains. There are even roaches in the bathroom, emerging at night from the cracks in the tiles. But she has complained of none of this. (30)

Her expectations of married life are minimal, conditioned as she is to marry a stranger and travel thousands of miles away from her known and loved spheres of family and friends. Nevertheless, she is unprepared for the extreme feelings of loneliness and alienation that she feels in Boston as she begins to live her life with her husband. Her husband, on the other hand, is living the life that he has chosen, in America. After a serious accident in his youth in Calcutta, he opts to move to America to pursue education, prospects and the middle-class life of an academic:

He was...nearly killed at twenty-two. Again he tastes the dust on his tongue, sees the twisted train, the giant overturned iron wheels. None of this was supposed to happen. But no, he had survived it. He was born twice in India, and then a third time, in America. Three lives by thirty. (21)

Growing up in Calcutta, surrounded by crowds of family and loved ones, Ashima finds her singular foreign-ness in Boston deeply unsettling after her ubiquitous rootedness in Calcutta. The lack of familiarity with her surroundings in Boston, the absence of a large and involved family, the strangeness of language, the sparse presence of her own community, all contribute to Ashima's sense of helplessness and isolation, "Nothing feels normal to Ashima. For the past eighteen months, ever since she's arrived in Cambridge, nothing has felt normal at all" (6). And when some months after her arrival in Boston Ashima becomes pregnant, the experience of pregnancy, childbirth and the prospect of child-rearing in this land that feels so utterly foreign to her is almost more than she can bear:

Until now Ashima has accepted that there is no one... But now, with a baby crying in her arms... it is all suddenly unbearable.

'I can't do this,' she tells Ashoke...

'In a few days you'll get the hang of it,' he says, hoping to encourage her...

'I won't,' she insists thickly...

'What are you saying, Ashima?' ...

'I'm saying I don't want to raise Gogol [her son] alone in this country...I want to go back.' (33)

But they do not go back. Ashima gets busy with motherhood and running a home and learns to make a life in the foreign land:

She begins to pride herself on doing it alone, in devising a routine. Like Ashoke, busy with his teaching and research and dissertation...she, too, now has something to occupy her fully... Before Gogol's birth, her days had followed no visible pattern... But now the days that had once dragged rush all too quickly toward evening. (35)

As Ashima adjusts to the alien-ness of her life in Cambridge, so she learns to maintain fierce contact with her hometown, Calcutta and her absent family through a quotidian traffic of letters, written and received. And she builds a community of Bengalis like herself, adrift and seeking the comfort of familiars:

As the baby grows, so too does their circle of Bengali acquaintances.... Every weekend, it seems, there is a new home to go to, a new couple or young family to meet. They all

come from Calcutta, and for this reason alone they are friends....The families drop by one another's homes on Sunday afternoons. (38)

When Gogol is one, Ashima and Ashoke make plans and save up for Ashima's first trip back home to Calcutta. She shops and saves and buys presents for her family; loses her shopping bag on the subway and finds it again, untouched and pristine: "Somehow, this small miracle causes Ashima to feel connected to Cambridge in a way she has not previously thought possible" (43). But the trip is a grief-stricken one as she hears of her father's death before her departure and her first trip back becomes one of loss and mourning.

For the next few years, Ashima's life follows the trajectory of success that Ashoke charts for it:

The Gangulis have moved to a university town outside of Boston. As far as they know, they are the only Bengali residents... Ashoke has been hired as an assistant professor of electrical engineering at the university... The job is everything Ashoke has ever dreamed of....

For Ashima, migrating to the suburbs feels more drastic, more distressing than the move from Calcutta to Cambridge had been. She wishes Ashoke had accepted the position at Northeastern so that they could have stayed in the city. (49)

But this too, she accepts, as she has everything else that her life has thrown at her and finally, Ashima and Ashoke are ready to purchase a home. In the evenings, after dinner, they set out in their car, Gogol in the back seat, to look for houses for sale... In the end they decide on a shingled two-storey colonial in a recently built development... This is the small patch of America to which they lay claim....

The address is 67 Pemberton Road. (51)

This is the house where Ashima lives for the next 27 years, till Ashoke's death. It is in this house that her daughter Sonali, who is called Sonia, is born and in this house that her children grow up, go to school and leave home. It is in this house that she entertains her swelling community of Bengali friends with lavish parties, full of painstakingly cooked foods that recall the taste of home for her and her community of migrants. As her children grow up, she learns

to accept their American tastes in food, clothes, friends and relationships, including their relationships with their parents:

Having been deprived of the company of her own parents upon moving to America, her children's independence, their need to keep their distance from her, is something she will never understand. Still she had not argued with them. This, too, she is beginning to learn. (166)

Every few years she visits her hometown, Calcutta, with her children and Ashoke and one year she and her family spend eight months in India for Ashoke's sabbatical, which she and Ashoke love and her children hate.

As the years pass, Ashima becomes the centre of her community of Bengalis and her life in New England expands as she takes on a part-time job at the community library and builds alliances and friendships there. But through it all Ashima remains the tremulous immigrant. When Ashoke takes a job in Cleveland, she reluctantly learns to live on her own, "At forty-eight she has come to experience the solitude that her husband and son and daughter already know, and which they claim not to mind" (161).

It is when Ashoke suddenly dies in Cleveland that she realizes the outlines of her own identity. Surrounded by her community of friends and flanked by her children, she decides to stay in this adopted land, where she has made a home for her husband:

For the first time in her life, Ashima has no desire to escape to Calcutta, not now. She refuses to be so far from the place where her husband made his life, the country in which he died. (183)

At the end of the novel, Lahiri leaves us with Ashima's decision to sell the house that she has lived in for most of her married life and become a transnational, living partly in India and partly in America with her children and friends:

Ashima has decided to spend six months of her life in India, six months in the States... In Calcutta, Ashima will live with her younger brother, Rana, and his wife...in a spacious flat in Salt Lake. In spring and summer she will return to the Northeast, dividing her time among her son, her daughter, and her close Bengali friends. True to the meaning of her name, she will be without borders, without a home of her own, a resident everywhere and nowhere. (276)

Ashima the immigrant by circumstance transforms into the transnational by choice, as she decides to carve her own life and identity, lived between countries and beyond borders.

The interplay of class, community and identity in *The Namesake*

Lahiri sets *The Namesake* squarely among the Indian urban middle-class, specifically Bengali urban middle-class. Ashima and Ashoke, its protagonists, grow up in the city, Calcutta, and are defined by their educational aspirations and values, which they believe give them social mobility and cultural capital. They take these values with them to the US, transplant them there, and find resonance for them among all the other Bengali immigrants who become their community in America:

The husbands are teachers, researchers, doctors, engineers.... They drink tea with sugar and evaporated milk and eat shrimp cutlets fried in saucepans...They sit in circles on the floor, singing songs by Nazrul and Tagore... They argue riotously over the films of Ritwik Ghatak versus those of Satyajit Ray. (38)

The middle class in India and particularly in Bengal is characterized by the significance it attaches to education, music, literature and culture. This reverence of knowledge and the belief that it accumulates class capital is informed by a colonial view of learning, where facility with English and English thought and literature is considered an asset. So, in our early introduction to Ashima, we learn of her embarrassment over the errors she makes in her English – a language learnt but rarely spoken, till she arrives in America:

Suddenly Ashima realizes her error, knows she should have said ‘fingers’ and ‘toes’. This error pains her almost as much as her last contraction. English had been her subject. In Calcutta, before she was married, she was working toward a college degree. She used to tutor neighbourhood schoolchildren in their homes...helping them to memorize Tennyson and Wordsworth, to pronounce words like *sign* and *cough*, to understand the difference between Aristotelian and Shakespearean tragedy. But in Bengali, a finger can also mean fingers, a toe toes. (7)

In this paragraph Lahiri includes all of the class signifiers that make Ashima a middle-class, Bengali woman: the fact that she was a college-educated woman, the fact that she earned an income through teaching children English, the fact that she was familiar with classical education, etc. In fact even before we meet Ashoke, we are informed of his class status through the job that he does and his educational qualifications (a graduate of an English medium school and a specialized engineering college and a doctoral candidate in MIT in America); and Ashima recognizes that her husband is a class apart when she sees his shoes – embossed and branded brown leather shoes with black heels and off-white laces and stitching – as opposed to the slippers and sandals that she is used to (2, 8, 9).

Ashima's middle-class status, located originally in Calcutta, and then in the suburban university towns of the American Northeast, and among the professional university educated Bengali immigrants who become her community, determines the identity that she crafts for herself to survive her sense of loss and alienation. It is the 1960s and Ashoke, an engineer by training, is the original middle-class immigrant, driven to America by the ambition of better education, better professional prospects and a better life; and he lives his life in his adopted country with far less wariness and anxiety than does his new wife. Ashoke draws his confidence from his status as a university professor; his sense of security comes from his feeling of the success that he has made of his life in America, through his teaching job at the university, which is the job of his dreams:

The job is everything Ashoke has ever dreamed of. He has always hoped to teach in a university rather than work for a corporation. What a thrill, he thinks, to stand lecturing before a roomful of American students. What a sense of accomplishment it gives him to see his name printed under 'Faculty' in the university directory. (49)

Ashima is a fundamentally middle-class young woman with the social and cultural capital common to her class group. However, while this would have given her class security in her hometown, in Boston she feels out of place; in Boston she draws her identity from Ashoke's and because it is an adopted identity, it is without his sense of achievement. As a result, her self- image is constructed as 'the other', a tentative immigrant – a Bengali woman

in Boston – a perpetual foreigner, “being a foreigner, Ashima believes, is something that elicits... curiosity from strangers, the...combination of pity and respect” (50).

Through the novel, Ashima the ‘exile’ exists on a different plain from Ashoke the ‘immigrant’. As an immigrant, Ashoke’s is a success story; one of opportunities fulfilled. Ashoke fulfils his class ambitions; through education he achieves professional and material success and in a sense responds to the immigrant dream of success and opportunity in the adopted land. As an exile, Ashima’s is a narrative of dislocation and a continuous harking back to the lost ‘home’ in the original homeland, where her security lies; so that even as joyous and fulfilling an event as her son’s birth, feels to her incomplete:

Without a single grandparent or parent or uncle or aunt at her side, the baby’s birth, like most everything else in America, feels somehow haphazard, only half true. (25)

It is in trying to create a substitute community of ‘home’ that Ashima begins to create a space and identity of her own in the adopted land. The community that she gathers around her are all people like herself and her husband – educated young men from Calcutta, who follow professions as professors, researchers, doctors, engineers, in university towns in America, with wives who try to come to terms with the new land of their marriage:

Like Ashoke, the bachelors fly back to Calcutta one by one, returning with wives...

Most of them live within walking distance of one another in Cambridge....

The wives, homesick and bewildered, turn to Ashima for recipes and advice, and she tells them about the carp that’s sold in Chinatown, that it’s possible to make halwa from Cream of Wheat. (38)

Interestingly, while Ashima’s core community remains her Bengali friends, her reflected class status (from Ashoke) allows her to create affiliations which would otherwise not have been usual to her – relationships with the families of other professors who are Americans and vastly different to her in every way. But they live as neighbours and what unites them is their profession as professors; and Ashima is able to create mixed race connections and be part of this community because of her husband and his acceptance into

this class through his profession. So some of the most practical items she receives when Gogol, her son, is born are from this community:

Alan and Judy and Amber and Clover, all there to see the baby. Judy holds a dish covered with a checkered cloth in her hands, says she's made a broccoli quiche. Alan sets down a...bag full of Amber and Clover's old baby clothes, uncorks a bottle of cold champagne.... They raise their mugs to Gogol... Alan offers to bring up the girls' crib from the basement, and together he and Ashoke assemble it in the space next to Ashima and Ashoke's bed. (33)

Alan and Judy also give Ashima the pram for Gogol; and it is through this vehicle and the outing that it facilitates with Gogol, that Ashima has her first renewing, independent engagement with her world in this hitherto alien land. In that sense Lahiri imbues this mixed race, middle-class connection with a symbolism both weighty and poignant:

Ashima, on her own with Gogol...cries the whole day.... She cries when she calls Ashoke at his department and he does not answer. One day she cries when she...discovers that they've run out of rice.... She calls Ashoke at his department to ask him to pick up the rice on his way home. This time, when there is no answer, she gets up, washes her face and combs her hair. She changes and dresses Gogol and puts him into the navy blue, white-wheeled pram inherited from Alan and Judy. For the first time, she pushes him through the balmy streets of Cambridge...to buy a bag of...rice. The errand takes longer than usual; for now she is repeatedly stopped on the street...by perfect strangers, all Americans, suddenly taking notice of her, smiling, congratulating her. (34)

Once again, Alan and Judy, when her father dies, are the first of Ashima's community abroad, apart from her husband, to share in her first major sorrow; and it is Ashoke again, as the class interlocutor, who makes this connection possible:

Alan and Judy, waking the next morning to Ashima's sobs, then hearing the news from Ashoke, leave a vase filled with flowers by the door. (46)

Ashima's construction of her community is around food, cooking and parties, where she shares the food that she has cooked with people who crave the familiar tastes of home,

just as she does. It is significant that Ashima's first positive encounter with her adopted homeland is when she steps out to buy rice. Rice is the staple food of Bengalis and both a comfort and a necessity in a meal. She has run out of white rice and her neighbour Judy has only brown rice; so Ashima must go out to buy the white, long-grain rice that she knows; and when she is out to do this, she encounters the warmth of strangers who express interest in her child and this becomes her first encouraging interaction in the foreign land (34). Later in the novel, Lahiri harks back to this building of community through the consumption of rice – its symbolic richness in Ashima's life:

For together they form a record of all the Bengalis she and Ashoke have known over the years, all the people she has had the fortune to share rice with in a foreign land. (159-160)

Social anthropologist Mary Douglas believes that the cooking and eating of food encode social relations and transaction across boundaries and that each meal carries forward something of the meaning of other meals (Douglas 1975). For Ashima cooking and sharing of food are central activities, inextricably linked with family and social function. It is through this creative and family activity that she begins to find her space and locus in her community and thus in the world outside. Chase and Shaw elaborate on the nostalgia conjured by ethnic foods as:

Talismans that link us concretely with the past....(1989:4).

The cooking and eating of food become fundamental activities around which the families that Ashima knows come together and food becomes a recognized currency of the shared desire for home and community. For Ashima the parties that she throws assume a form of expression and communication with the community around the shared tastes of food:

Gogol's Fourteenth Birthday. Like most events in his life, it is another excuse for his parents to throw a party for their Bengali friends... As usual his mother cooks for days beforehand, cramming the refrigerator with stacks of foil-covered trays... Close to forty guests come from three different states. (72)

To compensate for the absences and loneliness of her foreign life, Ashima constantly seeks new engagements and friendships. In part, her middle-class suburban location opens up

unfamiliar spaces and to make up for her loneliness, she builds parallel communities for herself in them:

Three afternoons a week and two Saturdays a month, she works at the public library... It is Ashima's first job in America, the first since before she was married... She works at the library to pass the time... She is friendly with the other women who work at the library, most of them also with grown children... They are the first American friends she has made in her life. Over tea in the staff room, they gossip... On occasion she has her library friends over to the house for lunch, goes shopping with them on weekends. (162-163)

The community that Ashima draws around herself in the adopted land steps in as the absent family, and creates the security of familiarity in her time of grief when her husband dies:

For the first week they are never alone. No longer a family of four, they become a household of ten, sometimes twenty, friends coming by to sit with them quietly in the living room, their heads bent, drinking cups of tea, a cluster of people attempting to make up for his father's [Ashoke's] loss. (179)

In many ways, while Ashima builds a community as the means necessary for her to survive the harsh alienation of the foreign land, for the community too, she is their glue. So early on in the novel, she is the one to whom the newly-arrived, bewildered young wives turn for counsel and company. And at the end of the novel, as the community that she has gathered together prepares to bid her good bye for six months of the year, they reflect on the shared sense of togetherness that she has created for them:

People talk of how much they've come to love Ashima's...parties...that it won't be the same without her. They have come to rely on her...to collect them together. (286)

At the end of the novel, Lahiri has Ashima drawing not simply sustenance from the community that she has created but also satisfaction:

This will be the last party that Ashima will host at Pemberton Road... For now, there is nothing left to be done... She eyes everything with anticipation. Normally cooking for parties leaves her without an appetite, but tonight she looks forward to serving herself, sitting among her guests. (275-277)

It is a satisfaction based on her middle-class affiliations; she is content in the company of people like her and she is secure in the choices that she has, of travelling freely across borders and living in different countries. It is this access, to community across countries and solitude across countries, that contributes to her self-confidence and identity, as a borderless transnational.

Claimed and unclaimed spaces in *The Namesake*

Lahiri uses the notion of space and its transformation – from cold unfamiliarity to rueful familiarity – to express how Ashima moves, from feeling lost and bereft in it, to laying claim to it. The novel opens with a pregnant Ashima, in the kitchen of her apartment in Boston, a place where she lives with her new husband and which, by virtue of that fact, she must now think of as home; but the space remains unfamiliar to her. One of the ways that she tries to create familiarity is through evoking familiar tastes and smells in her apartment. So she tries to make a common Indian snack, sold on the streets of Calcutta, with the ingredients at hand. However, no matter how hard she tries, the taste of this simple snack is never quite the same as she remembers:

On a sticky August evening...Ashima Ganguli stands in the kitchen of a Central Square apartment, combining Rice Krispies and Planters peanuts and chopped red onion in a bowl. She adds salt...wishing there was mustard oil to pour in the mix. Ashima has been consuming this concoction throughout her pregnancy, a humble approximation of the snack sold for pennies on Calcutta sidewalks and on railway platforms throughout India... Even now that there is barely space inside her, it is the one thing she craves. Tasting from a cupped palm, she frowns; as usual, there's something missing. (1)

While there is an ingredient that is missing (mustard oil), her feeling of lost taste comes from the absence of familiarity and security of what to her is 'home', which is what the snack conjures for her. Since the space of 'home' is missing for her in her foreign setting, the taste of this snack in her foreign apartment can never offer Ashima the satiation of home.

Ashima feels out of place for most of the time in the land of her married home. Starting from her arrival in America, to her lonely and family-free pregnancy, Ashima is beset by this space around her “where she is related to no one, where she knows so little, where life seems so tentative and spare” (6). Lahiri dramatizes this feeling powerfully by setting Ashima’s arrival in Cambridge’s cold dark winter, and pitches it against her departure from a Calcutta which is warm, moist, crowded and where amidst the airport confusion, twenty-six members of her family come to see her off (4). In America, Ashima wakes up to her, “first real glimpse of America: Leafless trees with ice-covered branches. Dog urine and excrement embedded in the snow banks. Not a soul on the street” (30).

This unwelcoming description of the landscape is code for the cold, cheerless, bereft feelings that her lived space evokes in Ashima. As a migrant she always looks on her present as an interregnum – a pause before she returns home – and so she surrounds herself with memories and objects that recall familiarity for her in her unfamiliar surroundings:

Ashima looks up from a tattered copy of *Desh* magazine that she’d brought to read on her plane ride to Boston and still cannot bring herself to throw away. The printed pages of Bengali type, slightly rough to the touch, are a perpetual comfort to her. (6)

Lahiri situates Ashima within the traditional space of the home but crafts her narrative to allow the exigencies of an immigrant life to intrude upon the domestic space and compel Ashima to step out of her home literally and metaphorically. It is this ‘stepping out’ of her usual space which helps Ashima to seek and discover new frameworks of engagement, which in turn enables her to negotiate her sense of displacement. For example, the first time she takes her son out for a stroll in his pram, it is not to interact with the neighbours but to buy white, long-grain rice that she will cook for dinner. She has run out of the rice and her American neighbour can only offer her brown rice; to Ashima, this is not an acceptable substitute. For her, white rice promises an idealized abundance of flavour, just as brown rice constitutes an imagined starkness. Her desire for one and rejection of the other is her means of laying claim to her present on her own terms. In other words, by using white rice instead of brown, she purposefully flavours her life with remembered tastes. It is when she is out to buy this rice that her environment appears less hostile and she begins to engage with it, as

passers by and strangers stop her to admire and enquire after the baby in the pram. This then becomes Ashima's first reassuring encounter with her foreign landscape (34).

The slow erosion of the sense of otherness of space that Ashima feels happens over a series of incidents and encounters, which make her feel that the space that she inhabits is welcoming, generous and within her control. One of these is when Ashima forgets her bag with the gifts (which she has painstakingly chosen for her family, for her first trip back to India) on the train, and is distraught because she feels that she cannot afford to replace them.

Ashoke rescues the situation:

When Ashoke comes home he calls the MBTA lost and found; the following day the bags are returned, not a teaspoon missing. Somehow, this small miracle causes Ashima to feel connected to Cambridge in a way she has not previously thought possible, affiliated with its exceptions as well as its rules. (43)

Lahiri uses this incident, literally and metaphorically, to describe the shift in Ashima's state of mind, from feeling lost and adrift, to finding direction and engagement with her environment. In fact her connection with this particular space and its rules allows Ashima to act out a uniquely symbolic act – after she hears of her Father's death, she takes all the gifts intended for him and leaves them behind on the train, this time deliberately (46); she uses the anonymity of the train as a space where she symbolically divests herself of the joy of greeting her father. In this way, the space of the train also becomes the repository of her grief.

Although Ashima never truly sheds the feeling of being a perpetual foreigner, she gradually begins to lay claim to her life and space in the new land. This starts with the buying of their house and continues with settling into the neighbourhood in which she will live for the next two decades (49-52). Eventually the spaces of her former life begin to loosen their hold on her imagination, even though she continues to be a metaphoric itinerant for the entire novel (63). Her sense of claiming her own space culminates when, after her husband's death, instead of going back to Calcutta, her hometown, she decides to stay on in Pemberton Road, the house where she had made a home for her husband, and which is where she feels she belongs (183).

At this point of the novel, towards its end, home is no longer a geographically defined place but a state of mind for Ashima – a space of comfort, in spite of what is missing:

And though she still does not feel fully at home within these walls on Pemberton Road she knows that this is home nevertheless – the world for which she is responsible, which she has created, which is everywhere around her. (280)

Here, Lahiri positions Ashima in a space of her own choosing. This is in direct contrast to her earlier arrival as an immigrant, when she leaves her familiar surroundings and accompanies her husband to America with little choice in the matter. After the death of her husband, when Ashima can exercise the option of returning to her oft-remembered homeland, she does not do so. Instead she opts for a life of wandering between two countries. It is the conceptual spatial freedom of this life, which is interesting in terms of the choice that she makes. It points to the contrast between her previously circumscribed boundaries – when she lived her life by the codes and wishes of others – and her opted-for borderless identity, even if that means having no fixed address.

Finding love in marriage and its impact on identity in *The Namesake*

When she calls out to Ashoke, she doesn't say his name. Ashima never thinks of her husband's name when she thinks of her husband, even though she knows perfectly well what it is. She has adopted his surname but refuses, for propriety's sake, to utter his first. It's not the type of things Bengali wives do...a husband's name is something intimate and therefore unspoken, cleverly patched over. (2)

Lahiri portrays Ashima's relationship with her husband as defined by propriety and custom rather than intimacy. It is interesting that one of their moments of spontaneous intimacy occurs before she meets her husband when Ashoke and his family have come to see Ashima as a prospective bride. Ashima is in the hallway, waiting to go in to see Ashoke and her curiosity about him gets the better of her caution; she slips her feet into his shoes which are lying outside the room, and which are unlike any she has seen before:

Lingering sweat from the owner's feet mingled with hers, causing her heart to race; it was the closest thing she had ever experienced to the touch of a man. (8)

It is clear that Ashima considers this an indiscretion because she never shares this act of hers with Ashoke, even later when they share a bed and a home. The propriety and conventions

that govern her relationship with Ashoke prevent her from an engagement of intimacy with him. But the life that she lives with him without her extended family and the loneliness she feels in the foreign land, where her husband is her only intimate, enables her to develop a companionship with him that may not have been possible in the familial comfort of her hometown. So they develop rituals of togetherness that bring them closer in a dependant relationship to each other, even though their notions of intimacy continue to be defined by the custom of their upbringing:

At night, lying beside her in bed, he listens to her describe the events of her day. (10)

Before he left for the university he would leave a cup of tea by the side of the bed. (11)

Ashima is the one who keeps all their addresses, in a small notebook she carries in her purse. It has never occurred to him to buy his wife flowers. (12)

One of the most revealing scenes in the novel that illustrates the tenderness of Ashima's relationship with Ashoke occurs when he tells her of her father's death. Ashoke's intensity of feeling for Ashima in this scene and his compassion towards her grief is remarkable, given the circumspect relationship that they share. It is through moments like these that Lahiri highlights the love and regard that Ashima and Ashoke share, that develops between them so powerfully because of the loneliness of their foreign, family-less existence in the adopted land:

He presses her to the bed, lying on top of her, his face to one side, his body suddenly trembling. He holds her this way for so long that she begins to wonder if he is going to turn off the light and caress her. Instead he tells her what Rana told him a few minutes ago, what Rana couldn't bear to tell his sister, over the telephone, himself: that her father died yesterday evening, of a heart attack. (46)

What is striking about this scene is also what it reveals of Ashima's passivity with regard to her sexuality; when Ashoke embraces her, she does not know the reason for his embrace and does not show any initiative or independent will with regard to whether she desires his

embrace or not – it seems that she would simply submit to his desire, if he was going to caress her. To understand the identity that Ashima develops, through her relationship with her husband, it is important to compare her sexual passivity in this scene with the richness of the emotional register that she shares with Ashoke, also evidenced by this scene. It is this compliance in her character, that over years of living and accepting the difference of her life abroad develops into the stoic calm that then propels her to her transboundary identity choice. It is also this submissiveness that only allows her to voice her love for her husband and the preference for the life that she has lived, at the end of the novel and after his death:

Ashima feels lonely suddenly, horribly, permanently alone, and briefly, turned away from the mirror, she sobs for her husband... She feels both impatience and indifference for all the days she still must live, for something tells her she will not go quickly as her husband did... She will miss the country in which she had grown to know and love her husband. Though his ashes have been scattered into the Ganges, it is here, in this house and in this town, that he will continue to dwell in her mind. (278-279)

Ashima's patient acceptance of marriage and the life that this brings her causes her to exist simultaneously in two planes of attachment and detachment. This is true of her relationship with her husband as well as with the rest of her life. So she is able to view the omissions and commissions of her life without rancour – she accepts that while she did not marry for love, her love for her husband grew over the years, even though she continued to miss the life she had left behind in her hometown:

Her husband had given her the robe years ago... She knows...that it had been either Gogol or Sonia who had picked it out...had wrapped it, even... She does not fault him for this. Such omissions of devotion, of affection, she knows now, do not matter in the end.

She no longer wonders what it might have been like to do what her children have done, to fall in love first rather than years later...she thinks...of their life together, of the unexpected life he, in choosing to marry her, had given her here... And though she does not feel fully at home within these walls...she knows that this is home

nevertheless – the world for which she is responsible, which she has created, which is everywhere around her. (279-280)

Ashima cultivates a distance from her emotions, which enables her to survive her lonely, foreign life with her stranger husband. Even when she grows to know and love her husband and come to terms with the unexpected-ness of her life in the foreign land, she maintains her aloofness towards her desires, so that she may live without expectation. So when she has to make a life choice for the first time in her life, after her husband's death – she chooses to live in the space between her desires of home and homeland – without commitment, across countries and simultaneously in both.

Conclusion: Muteness versus voice and identity in *The Namesake*

It had been after tutoring one day that Ashima's mother had met her at the door, told her to go straight to the bedroom and prepare herself; a man was waiting to see her. He was the third in as many months... And so, obediently but without expectation, she had untangled and rebraided her hair...patted some...powder...onto her skin. (7)

This is the early Ashima that we meet - mute, passive, without expectation, prepared for rejection and without any agency of her own. The novel explores Ashima's transformation from a traditional, family-loving, voiceless, obedient Bengali girl with strong roots in Calcutta, to a hesitant but independent diasporic. The novel spans thirty-odd years, tracing Ashima's early sense of helpless loneliness to her ultimate recognition of herself as a self-sufficient, self-governing woman with agency and choice.

Ashima's marriage to Ashoke appears to be an act of everyone else's volition but her own, and she has to follow him unquestioningly, to his home in America. But her sojourn in Boston, where she is forced to fend for herself without relatives and family and help, begins to mould her personal views and while she still lacks the agency to craft her own space, she begins to give vent to her voice. After her son is born we see her expressing her doubts, fears and anxieties to Ashoke, enough to concern him, though it does not change his life choice:

Until now Ashima has accepted that there is no one to sweep the floor, or do the dishes, or wash clothes, or shop for groceries, or prepare a meal on the days she is tired or homesick or cross... But now, with a baby crying in her arms...it is all suddenly unbearable.

'I can't do this,' she tells Ashoke...

He looks at Ashima, her face leaner, the features sharper than they had been at their wedding, aware that her life in Cambridge, as his wife, has already taken a toll... Early mornings, when he senses that she is quietly crying, he puts an arm around her but can think of nothing to say. (33)

In her continuing search for familiarity and belonging in the new land, Ashima, hesitantly at first and then increasingly confidently, begins to build a life and community where she is comfortable and able to be herself. So she surrounds herself with the community of Bengalis, joins the library and develops friendships with other women of her age and stage. Lahiri draws attention to the fact of her growing independence, through the eyes of her son, when Ashoke gets a prestigious temporary fellowship in Cleveland and Ashima refuses to accompany him:

At first it was assumed that his parents would shut up the house...and that his mother would go too. But then his mother had surprised them, pointing out that there would be nothing for her to do in Ohio for nine months...and that she preferred to stay in Massachusetts, even if it meant staying in the house alone. (144)

What is interesting about this scene is that Ashima, who has lived her life in deference to the wishes of her husband and children, now chooses her own company, her own space and her own community. She exercises independent will, even if it means going against the expected tradition of accompanying her husband. This she is able to do because she has learnt to survive the hard, harsh way – by accepting the nuclear, solitary living that her foreign life has forced on her. It is her acceptance of this imperfect reality, which leads her to acknowledge her individual identity and give voice to her wishes.

The issue of voice and agency has been the subject of extensive feminist theory, politics and literature and like so many who have gone before her Ashima's quest for her

voice and identity is a learned one, circumstantial rather than deliberately sought, since the travails of her immigrant life force her to seek community, acculturation and eventually, identity. The most poignant and powerful expressions of Ashima's voice are after Ashoke dies, when she chooses to remain in Cambridge, in the space of his death and memories:

Friends suggest she go to India, see her brother and her cousins for a while. But for the first time in her life, Ashima has no desire to escape to Calcutta, not now. She refuses to be so far from the place where her husband made his life, the country in which he died. 'Now I know why he went to Cleveland,' she tells people... 'He was teaching me how to live alone.' (183)

Ashima claims her space in the place where her grief is – but where also her life and renewal lie; in the expression of her agency here, she restores herself, births herself anew, through her grief and loss.

Ashima's voice at the end of the novel, after Ashoke's death, is solitary, calm, painful and curiously content:

It occurs to Ashima that the next time she will be by herself; she will be travelling, sitting on the plane. For the first time...she will make the journey entirely on her own. The prospect no longer terrifies her. (276)

As a single woman of independent means, she seeks both solitude and community on her terms and she chooses a life and identity against the grain of the established limitations of boundaries:

Ashima has decided to spend six months of her life in India, six months in the States... True to the meaning of her name, she will be without borders, without a home of her own, a resident everywhere and nowhere. (275-276)

In this context, it is significant to dwell upon Lahiri's choice of name for her protagonist: 'Ashima' in Bengali means one without limits or boundaries and Ashima lives up to her eponymous potential by reconstructing her sense of self by eroding boundaries and choosing to live between cultures and countries. Through the pain and disruption of her immigrant experience, Ashima chooses for herself a discourse of negotiation by means of which she both crosses borders and redefines them. Through Ashima's voice, the reader can view

identity within the diaspora as a realm of dynamic dialogue, resolutely conducted from the traditional spaces of home and marriage; in this space, Ashima chooses a future of movement, of transnationalism – and so promotes a gendered vision of diasporic identity.

Chapter 3

The Reluctant Immigrant: Gender and agency in Monica Ali's *Brick Lane*

What could not be changed must be borne. And since nothing could be changed, everything had to be borne. This principle ruled her life. It was mantra, fettle, and challenge. So that, at the age of thirty-four, after she had been given three children and had one taken away, when she had a futile husband and had been fated a young and demanding lover, when for the first time she could not wait for the future to be revealed but had to make it for herself, she was as startled by her own agency as an infant who waves a clenched fist and strikes itself upon the eye. (Ali 2008:5)

Monica Ali's evocative tale of diasporic migration, *Brick Lane* (2003), can be read as a narrative of identity creation, where its protagonist, Nazneen, travels from a state of mute acceptance of fate, to tentative but irrevocable, individual agency. In this chapter I will argue that *Brick Lane* demonstrates the idea that while women are often unwilling and unhappy subjects of migration, in fact it is this wrench of uprooting that enables them to renegotiate boundaries and create new and independent identities.

Brick Lane orbits around the experiences of a group of women with Nazneen as the core. Nazneen is a rural girl from Bangladesh who is projected into a life in London through an arranged marriage with a man much older than herself. Here she brings up her daughters and here she finds a community of friends, who like her, are uneasy immigrants. They too respond to their isolation with gradually dawning individualism, and learn to choose and live their own conceptions of their lives. Nazneen's route, through much of the novel, is one of 'disconnection', borne primarily of the disorienting loss of her village, her sister, her family and her familiars. But it is in the painful coping with the disconnection that she discovers her own agency, and in so doing unwraps a new identity and purpose to her life.

My argument also, in this thesis, is that class matters; it is responsible for the creation of the particular identity that Nazneen develops. The other factors that influence Nazneen's identity creation are the role of the community, her friends and her relationship with her religion, which changes as the novel progresses.

The novel opens in 1967 in rural Bangladesh. Nazneen is born to stoic, unhappy and fatalistic Rupban, and the story of her uncertain birth, when Rupban adamantly leaves it to fate, not medical intervention, to decide whether Nazneen would live or die, foreshadows much of her life: "And my child must not waste any energy fighting against Fate"(3). Nazneen survives – categorically and emphatically:

On the fifth day, when Rupban in spite of herself was beginning to wish that fate would hurry up and make up its mind, Nazneen clamped her mouth around the nipple so that a thousand red-hot needles ran through Rupban's breast and made her cry out for pain and for the relief of a good and patient woman. (4)

Nevertheless, Rupban's motto, "to be still in her heart and mind, to accept the Grace of God, to treat life with the same indifference with which it would treat her", determines much of Nazneen's life (4).

Nazneen grows up, along with her beloved sister Hasina, in the dusty, hot, tropical, village of Gouripur in Bangladesh where she was born. Her childhood is idyllic:

In Gouripur, in her dreams, she was always a girl and Hasina was always six. Amma scolded and cuddled, and smelled as sweet as the skin on the milk when it had been boiled all day with sugar. Abba sat on the choki, sang and clapped. (30)

But as she grows up, her youth is marked by her mother's stoic unhappiness and eventual suicide, her father's indifference and infidelity and her unassailable companionship with her sister. When at sixteen, her sister elopes with a lover, Nazneen's enraged father decides to marry the eighteen-year-old Nazneen off to an unprepossessing stranger, a man more than twenty years her senior. Obedient and unresisting, Nazneen accompanies her stranger-husband to London where she begins her lonely, isolated life:

In all her eighteen years, she could scarcely remember a moment that she had spent alone. Until she married. And came to London to sit day after day in this large box

with the furniture to dust, and the muffled sounds of private lives sealed away above, below, and around her. (12)

In London, Nazneen feels dislocated, uprooted and lost. Ali depicts Nazneen's homesickness and loneliness in terms of a contrast between the grimy, dingy, cluttered and sordid council housing that Nazneen inhabits physically in London's Brick Lane and the green fields, limpid ponds and climbing trees of Nazneen's remembered life in her village in Mymensingh, Bangladesh. Consider the two following passages, for example:

It was hot and the sun fell flat on the metal window frames and glared off the glass... The sign screwed to the brickwork was in stiff English capitals and the curliques beneath were Bengali. No Dumping. No Parking. No Ball Games. Two old men in white panjabi pajama and skullcaps walked along the path, slowly, as if they did not want to go where they were going. A thin brown dog sniffed along to the middle of the grass and defecated. The breeze on Nazneen's face was thick with the smell from the overflowing communal bins. (6)

And on the same day, a little while later:

She walked arm-in-arm to school with Hasina, and skipped part of the way and fell and they dusted their knees with their hands. And the mynah birds called from the trees, and the goats fretted by... And heaven, which was above, was wide and empty and the land stretched out ahead and she could see to the very end of it, where the earth smudged the sky in a dark blue line. (10)

In London's Brick Lane, in the Tower Hamlets council housing, Nazneen's marital home is cramped and cluttered with oversized furniture, of plastic, metal, wood and glass, synthetic rugs, her husband's books, papers, files and a glass showcase full of clay and pottery animals that Nazneen has to dust. Here Nazneen lives with her potbellied, spindly-legged, puffy-faced, older husband, who thinks of her as:

An unspoilt girl. From the village... Not beautiful, but not so ugly either... All things considered, I am satisfied... And a blind uncle is better than no uncle. I waited too long to get a wife. (10-11)

Very early in the novel, after coming to London, Nazneen overhears her husband Chanu describe her so on the telephone and Nazneen's mortification is absolute:

What had she imagined? That he was in love with her? That he was grateful because she, young and graceful, had accepted him?...Yes. Yes. She realized in a stinging rush she had imagined all these things. Such a foolish girl. (11)

This exchange sets the tone for the marriage – monotonous, humdrum, unromantic and without cruelty but with all the dreariness of the quotidian: "He [Chanu] showed no signs of wanting to beat her. In fact he was kind and gentle" (10); and "Would Chanu want his corns cut again tonight?" (12).

Nazneen lives her married life without complaint, but with stifled longings and half acknowledged desires. Watching ice skating on TV becomes for her the crystallization of sublimated sexuality (22, 23, 27) and the razoring of Chanu's hair, dead skin, corns and nails, the site of imagined mutinies, "She razored away the dead flesh around his corns. She did not let the razor slip" (30). Her flavourful, aromatic cooking and furtive, solitary, unstructured, oftentimes midnight, eating (so that she does not share the table with Chanu) become the watermark for her marriage:

Life made its pattern around and beneath and through her. Nazneen cleaned and cooked and washed... Then she ate standing up at the sink and washed the dishes... And the days were tolerable, and the evenings were nothing to complain about. (26-27)

Nazneen's life in Tower Hamlets is shared with the other Bangladeshi women who live there, significantly Razia, whom she befriends even though Chanu does not consider her appropriate company (63). Chanu is suspicious of Nazneen's relationship with Razia because he senses, correctly, that he is marginal in that engagement and so he pushes her towards the elderly and opportunistic usurer Mrs Islam: "Mrs Islam is what you call a respectable type...Razia, on the other hand, I would not call a respectable type" (63). Nazneen however, is drawn to Razia:

Razia introduced her to other Bengali wives on the estate. Sometimes they would call and drink tea with her. She enjoyed the company, although most times she did not

mention it to Chanu... She enjoyed seeing Razia the most. Razia always had stories to tell. She was a mimic, a big bony clown. (32)

Razia encourages Nazneen to go out, learn English, and experience her life in London with the liberties and opportunities that it offers (53-54). Chanu discourages Nazneen from all of this, including learning English (30, 57), though eventually this is the journey that Nazneen does make, at the end of the novel.

Nazneen's life in London is also defined by her love and longing for her sister Hasina. Since Hasina's elopement and Nazneen's departure for London, Hasina's presence in Nazneen's life is marked by her sporadic, spontaneous letters full of her tumultuous life, which come with uncertain frequency but which become the lode point in Nazneen's life through which she assesses her days. Though Hasina exhibits comparatively more agency than Nazneen by running away with her lover, her lack of education, resources and skills make her dependent on a series of untrustworthy and opportunistic men. She thus makes unwise and constrained life choices that compromise her security, self-esteem and wellbeing. Nazneen wants, more than anything else, to help Hasina and she tries to enlist Chanu in this endeavour. Chanu, however, disapproves of Hasina's willfulness and is also reluctant to reach out to her (44-45). Chanu's recalcitrance angers Nazneen and allows her to accept her feelings of rebellion against Chanu as legitimate:

But it was her heart that was ablaze, with mutiny...Nazneen dropped the promotion from her prayers... The razor slipped when she cut his corns. His files got mixed up when she tidied... Small insurrections, designed to destroy the state from within. (45)

The turgidity of Nazneen's life is finally broken with the birth and death of Raqib, her son. It is over this sudden illness and death that Nazneen develops her first emotional companionship with her husband:

Raqib was still asleep. Sometimes he opened his eyes but they were not seeing eyes... Chanu sat on the other side, arms folded across his chest. Whenever a nurse walked by he half unfolded them and looked up. Abba did not choose so badly. This was not a bad man... She could love him. Perhaps she did already...now she understood what he was, and why. (94)

A few years thereafter, Nazneen gives birth to her two daughters, Shahana and Bibi. Ali uses the device of Hasina's letters to trace the happenings of the intervening years, 1988-2001, and it is through these letters that we learn of Hasina's steadily deteriorating life and the birth of Nazneen's daughters.

Ali's account of Hasina's life through her letters speaks to her own views of choices made in otherwise disempowering circumstances. Hasina appears to have displayed more initiative and will in 'choosing' her life and loves. But her letters speak clearly to the fact that these choices, when unaccompanied by capacity and power, are in effect much more undermining than the 'choiceless' situation of Nazneen's life.

Chanu's relationship with his daughters, particularly Shahana (the older one), is defined by his abject inability to influence their upbringing. Shahana, inevitably and unalterably affected by her environment, challenges her father's every attempt to raise her as a Bangladeshi girl of his conception: "Chanu called her the little memsahib and wore himself out with threats...and Shahana took on his temper and yelled the ending... *'I didn't ask to be born here'* (144)". The younger daughter, Bibi, is more pliable though not more amenable to Chanu's views and is caught in the maelstrom of her sister's violent rebellion (143-144). Nazneen loves her daughters, strives to understand them, tries to protect them from their father's futile temper and is torn between the turbulence of her husband's impotent efforts to control his daughters' destinies and her own unshakeable resolve to see her daughters' aspirations fulfilled. It is in her relationship with her daughters and in developing a family life for them that she begins to move out of her own stoic upbringing of silent acceptance and acknowledges her daughters' protests and her own budding agency.

As Nazneen gradually grows into her friendships with Razia and the community of women, her relationship with her daughters and her life in London, so Chanu begins his overt disconnection from it and thus begin the grand plans of a return to the homeland, Dhaka (146-147). It is ironic that the efforts to finance the return home to Dhaka create the opportunities for the dawning of Nazneen's agency and individualism. Two new items enter Nazneen's house – a computer for Chanu and a sewing machine for Nazneen. Chanu uses the

computer to try and rally his family around the idea of Bangladesh by presenting that country to them on the internet. Nazneen learns sewing and becomes a seamstress; Chanu sources business for her; and the sewing machine generates the income that will eventually buy Chanu his ticket away from London and his family, and give Nazneen the security to stay on in London and make her life. The plans for home are also what prompt Chanu to take on a job as a taxi driver in order to make more money to finance the enterprise; and this is what brings Nazneen's lover Karim into her life:

So Chanu became a taximan and ceased to be a middleman. And on the first hot day of the year... a new middleman appeared. Karim, with a bale of jeans over his broad shoulder.

That was how he came into her life. (168-169)

Nazneen is attracted, against her will, impossibly and irrevocably to Karim:

She considered him. The way he stood with his legs wide and his arms folded. His hair. Cut so close to the skull... He wore his jeans tight and his shirtsleeves rolled up to the elbow... They looked strong, those arms... It was odd, that the shape of a skull could be so pleasing. (170)

Karim's youthful sexuality is a powerful magnet for her, in the context of Chanu's utter lack of attractiveness: "The man she would marry was old...he had a face like a frog" (6). And through the novel we are constantly told about the folds of fat that Chanu has, his spindly legs and his unfortunate dress sense:

He zipped his anorak and pulled up the hood, which was deep with a white furry trim... Front-on he looked like a kachuga turtle. She watched him from the window...scuttling across the estate. (37)

Karim kindles her dormant sexuality, which with Chanu had been so ignored:

He was the first man to see her naked. It made her sick with shame. It made her sick with desire... Though they began with a gentle embrace, tenderness could not satisfy her.

(246-247)

Nazneen embarks on a secretive, bold, passionate affair with him. Karim also engages Nazneen critically in her faith. Up to this point, Nazneen's practise of her religion was in a

personal space and she came to it as solace and to seek vindication of her fatalism. But Karim introduces her to the idea of political Islam and Nazneen finds herself developing her own critical thinking around it.

The stress of her affair, the conflict between her dawning self will and her upbringing of uncomplaining acceptance, Chanu's determination to return to Bangladesh, Shahana's steadfast refusal to do so and her own ambivalence towards this, along with the fraught father-daughter relationship, takes its toll on Nazneen and she collapses. Chanu doggedly and diligently nurses her through this collapse and the family emerges from it with the few moments of tenderness that Ali permits them:

It was late afternoon when she decided to open her eyes and participate in her life once again. By way of celebration the girls stayed up long after bedtime, and Chanu became a clown. (271)

One of the important markers of Nazneen's trajectory towards an independent identity is the solidarity that she feels with the community of women at Tower Hamlets and their lives, griefs, choices, narratives and friendships. She also begins to participate much more in the life of the community in Tower Hamlets through her connection with Karim and the feelings of unrest, insecurity and political opportunism that take over Tower Hamlets following the 9/11 attacks in New York; what is more, she draws her family into that engagement and we see Nazneen's erstwhile muteness giving way to her gradually strengthening voice, will and intelligence. As Chanu's plans to return to Bangladesh gain momentum so Nazneen begins to realize that her own desires are aligned to her daughters', to stay on in London and build a life there. And as Nazneen's sense of agency develops, so her relationship with Chanu attains a maturity, sympathy and understanding of the sorrows that they have endured, of the disappointments shared and not shared and the chasm between them:

'You see,' he said, and he mumbled it inside her palm. 'All these years I dreamed of going home a Big Man. Only now, when it's nearly finished for me, I realized what is important. As long as I have my family with me, my wife, my daughters, I am as strong as any man alive...

She pulled him in a little closer.

'What is all this Big Man?' She whispered in his ear... 'Do you think that is why I love you? Is that what there is in you to be loved?'

His tears scarred her hand.

'You're coming with me then?'...

'No,' she breathed... 'I can't go with you,'...

'I can't stay,' said Chanu, and they clung to each other inside a sadness that went beyond words and tears. (402)

Ultimately Nazneen's actions determine the course that her family takes in the novel. Her confrontation with the usurer Mrs Islam and her refusal to be exploited by her is one of the dénouements in the novel. As a confrontation of class, agency and voice it allows Chanu to fulfill his plans of returning home. So in an ironic act of subversion, it is Nazneen's agency that facilitates Chanu's actions. Nazneen decides to end her relationship with Karim and does so; and in her fearless protection of her daughter, her determination to shepherd her daughters' aspirations and see them fulfilled along with her own, she shapes the contours of her life so that Chanu leaves and she stays.

The novel ends with Nazneen as the architect of her own life: comfortable in her companionship with Chanu across the world; at peace with her sister Hasina's choices and chances; living her life with her daughters, and Razia, and the community of women, and their shared ingenuity, creativity and resourcefulness; and acknowledging and enjoying her desires and dreams.

Class: Its role and performance in the novel

Ali situates the novel in the London borough of Tower Hamlets, on Brick Lane. Her evocation of this ethnic ghetto is not the edginess of an East End street with the art and gentrification of contemporary London but the dingy dreariness of council housing and the racial marginalization of the 1980s. Ali refers to the peeling paint and cheap, pre-fabricated housing, the thick air and overflowing communal bins, the dogs defecating on the paths in the estate, the defaced walls and the dark, rank stairways. This is the particular location and

space that Nazneen inhabits – with its broken heating (34), its squalor, its unkemptness, the sense that it is overlooked by the urban planners and managers in the midst of the affluence and promise of the rest of London, and which influences the particular working class, communitarian and Bengali, immigrant identity that Nazneen develops.

The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy defines communitarianism as the need to balance individual rights and interests with that of the community as a whole. Communitarianism argues that individual people are shaped by the cultures and values of their communities. This creation of a working-class communitarian identity is a response to the trials of immigrant life that Nazneen and the other women experience. The promise of migration, with its hopes of affluence and the opportunities of a good life in the new land, are not upheld in the lives of these immigrants yet, despite this, it is still perceived as better than life in the homeland. Nevertheless the desire is always to save enough to be able to go back to the homeland, with money and status and success:

‘I used to think all the time of going back,’ said Dr Azad... ‘Every year I thought, “Maybe this year.” And I’d go for a visit... But something would always happen. A flood, a tornado that just missed the building, a power cut... And I’d think. “Well, maybe not this year.” And now, I don’t know. I just don’t know.’ (19)

We are introduced to Nazneen’s home in London through the presence of the Tattoo Lady; an overweight, heavily tattooed, poor, drunk, bored, unemployed, dysfunctional and lonely woman who seems to be utterly discarded by all (6, 7, 37) and whose apparent activities are to smoke, drink and scratch herself. The only human connection that the Tattoo Lady seems to have is the hand waves that she exchanges with Nazneen. It is through the representation of this poor, white woman, on the margins of society, and Nazneen’s paltry acts of connection with her, that Ali symbolizes the tedium, loneliness and alienation that Nazneen feels in her early days and life in the Tower Hamlets. The Tattoo Lady is also a symbol of life in the Tower Hamlets - the dearth of success, affluence and opportunity that it represents.

With Nazneen's loneliness as a leitmotif, Ali traces Nazneen's transition, from a rural, village girl to a working class, immigrant woman, influenced by her engagements with and occasional observations of the denizens of Tower Hamlets:

Nazneen...began to strike up acquaintances. She nodded to the apoplectic man in undershirt and shorts who flung open his door every time she passed it the harshly lit corridor. She smiled at the Bengali girls who chattered about boys at top volume on the stairs but fell silent as she passed. Razia introduced her to the other Bengali wives on the estate... She did not look at the group of young Bengali men who stood in the bottom of the stairwell, combing their hair and smoking or making loud, sudden hoots so that their voices bounded around the concrete shell of the building and rained down on her like firecrackers. In the summer evenings they stood outside next to the big metal bins...Nazneen did not look directly at them, but they were respectful as she passed. (32)

As Nazneen develops her friendships with Razia and the other women on the estate, so she begins to engage in ideas and discussions on going out more, taking up a job, learning English, mixing with other immigrant communities and other such aspects of an urban, immigrant, working class life (15, 16, 30-35). Ali describes Nazneen's felt but unvoiced resentment when Chanu resists her attempts to go out and about more:

'Why should you go out?' said Chanu. 'If you go out... I will look like a fool... What can you do?' ...She never said anything to this... She carried on with her chores.' (30).

'I would like to learn some English,' said Nazneen.

Chanu puffed his cheeks and spat the air out in a *fuff*. 'It will come. Don't worry about it. Where's the need anyway?' He looked at his book and Nazneen watched the screen. (23)

But as Jorina, one of the Bengali women on the estate, takes up a job and as Razia cedes her dependence on her miserly and uncaring husband and takes more control of her life by learning English and joining Jorina as a worker in the garment industry, so Nazneen begins to aspire to these acts. Initially she exerts her control over her resources by surreptitiously saving from the household expenditures; but eventually when she becomes a

seamstress, at Chanu's prompting, it seems like a logical progression of her life's trajectory. It is Chanu's lack of job opportunity and success and his desire to move up the social hierarchy, in Dhaka if not in London, that prompts him to encourage Nazneen's productive labour. Her financial contribution is necessary to advance his plans for himself and his family – and in this way Nazneen's class location contributes to her sense of self-worth and independence; it is through her ability to make a living for her family that she recognizes her potential to make a life for herself.

Nazneen's class identity derives by association, from her husband Chanu's. Through the novel Chanu struggles to move up the class hierarchy and constantly seeks 'respectability', either through association with people he considers aspirational – Mrs Islam and Dr Azad—or through his continuing and indiscriminate attempts at education. He recognizes that education is a means to gain social capital but he does not have the opportunity or the knowledge to seek the type of education that will advance his aspirations. So he ferrets out every related or unrelated technical or vocational course that he has access to:

'I have a degree from Dhaka University in English Literature...

'Of course, when I have my Open University degree then nobody can question my credentials.' (24)

He took down his framed certificates and explained them to her. 'This one... is a qualification in transcendental philosophy. Here's the one from Writers' Bureau, a correspondence course...

Here's my mathematics A level. That was a struggle... This is cycling proficiency, and this is my acceptance letter for the IT communications course – I only managed to get to a couple of classes.' (27)

Ali presents Chanu as constantly striving, unsuccessfully, against his class location. Nazneen, on the other hand, moves from her rural identity to an urban community of working-class women with relatively more ease and comfort, drawn from a sharing of common circumstances. It is useful to note here an explanation of community that R.A.

Nisbet provides in early sociological discourse, which provides the conceptual framework that Ali chooses in drawing her immigrant, working-class sorority of women:

By community I mean something that goes far beyond mere local community. The word, as we find it in much nineteenth and twentieth century thought, encompasses all forms of relationship which are characterized by a high degree of personal intimacy, emotional depth, moral commitment, social cohesion, and continuity in time...

Community is a fusion of feeling and thought, of tradition and commitment, of membership and volition. It may be found in, or given symbolic expression by, locality, religion, nation, race, occupation, or crusade. (Nisbet 1967:47-48)

Early on in the novel, when Nazneen has just arrived, “when her head was still spinning and the days were all dreams and real life came to her only at night, when she slept” (15), Chanu ensures that the two people that Nazneen meets are Mrs Islam and Dr Azad:

Mrs Islam was the first person who called on Nazneen, in those first few days... Mrs Islam was deemed by Chanu to be ‘respectable’. Not many people were ‘respectable’ enough to call or be called upon. (15)

One of the first people that Nazneen cooks for, other than Chanu, is Dr Azad, whom Chanu invites for dinner:

‘Dr Azad...has influence... Make sure you fry the spices properly, and cut the meat into big pieces. I don’t want small pieces of meat this evening.’ (16)

Ali uses the characters of Mrs Islam and Dr Azad, not so much as cultural stereotypes, but as counterpoints to Nazneen – to locate her class status in relation to theirs and to underline her ultimate integration into London, as opposed to their uncomfortable relationship with it. Michael Perfect refers to the ‘knowing irony’ that Ali employs in her use of these stereotypical characters:

I argue that the major concern of the novel is not the destabilization of stereotypes but the celebration of the potential for adaptation in both individuals and societies. I argue that Ali employs stereotypes as counterpoints in order to further emphasize her protagonist’s final integration into contemporary British society, and that the novel might usefully be understood as a ‘multicultural Bildungsroman’.

(Perfect 2008:109)

So Mrs Islam is described as a faintly ridiculous older woman who dresses oddly, “her sleeves bulged and bagged. She had carpet slippers on over black socks” (14), and who is continuously wheezing or complaining of aches and pains which she appears to endure stoically (17). Mrs Islam imposes her authority through her age, her time in London (30 years) and seniority on the estate (15-17). She projects herself as the moral compass of the community, but she is considered seriously only by someone like Chanu, who sees in her age and financial stability, a resolution to his insecurities and struggles. To Razia, Nazneen and the other women on the estate, Mrs Islam’s lack of generosity and compassion, her unctuousness and her inquisitiveness and forced involvement in everyone’s affairs make her unpopular. And when she is suspected to be a usurer, an act considered morally indefensible in Islam, she is quietly decried as a humbug and an extortionist and Nazneen denounces her as such, later in the novel (100-102, 372-375).

Ironically, although Mrs Islam may be seen as the aspirational and moral locus of the community, she is the one most removed from its emotional core. So although Mrs Islam lives on the estate, she is not considered a part of the working-class community of women that evolves throughout the novel and to which Nazneen chooses to belong at the end of the novel. It is Mrs Islam’s disingenuous and opportunistic exploitation of the hapless inhabitants of Tower Hamlets, along with her insularity and lack of compassion, that alienate her from the community of women on the estate. But to Chanu, Mrs Islam represents a high example of middle-class security and morality and in his naiveté and even obduracy; he does not see her greed and opportunism. In a sense Ali positions Chanu and Mrs Islam as the outsiders to the community that Nazneen builds and belongs to in the end. Razia and her cohort of women symbolize the working class community that comes together through financial and emotional necessity and support, whereas Mrs Islam and Chanu become the loners, with their middle-class aspirations, who are left behind or left out.

Dr Azad is presented as the other inhabitant of the middle class that Chanu so aspires to. Ali’s characterization of Dr Azad is as “a small, precise man” (18), “as neat as a tailor’s dummy. He held his arms smartly to his sides. White cuffs peeped out of his dark suit. His

collar and tie held up his precise chin and his hair was brushed to an ebony sheen” (84). The doctor speaks in hushed decibels, wears spotless white shirts with suffocatingly high ties (18-19), and follows disciplined, circumspect habits:

Dr Azad drank a glass of water down in one long draft and poured himself another. ‘I always drink two glasses before starting the meal.’ He drank the second glass. ‘Good. Now I will not overeat’. (18)

He is a quiet man of few words. Against this Ali presents Chanu as a man of untidy, unmeasured appetites who stains his shirt, talks while eating, is noisy, talkative and a spectacle to Azad’s hard-striven-for anonymity:

‘Eat! Eat!’ said Chanu... He scooped up lamb and rice with his fingers and chewed. He put too much food in his mouth at once, and he made sloppy noises as he ate. (18-19)

Nazneen recognizes, with Azad, Chanu’s pathetic efforts at bravado and justification for his life choices:

Dr Azad looked at Nazneen and, without meaning to, she returned his gaze so that she was caught in a complicity of looks, given and returned, which said something about her husband that she ought not to be saying. (21)

In this nuanced exchange between the educated, professional Dr Azad and the rural, untutored Nazneen, Ali gives Nazneen a subtlety that Chanu (in spite of his bumptious efforts at educating himself) lacks; and it is a subtlety born of Nazneen’s instinctive comfort with her class status as against Chanu’s railing discomfort with it.

Dr Azad is also Ali’s awkward immigrant. He is the qualified professional who achieves a measure of success through his professional capital, which should give him his imagined life. But his domestic unhappiness and his inability to belong to a cohort of friends, prevents him from integrating into the life around him and so he chooses to be as anonymous as he can (84-90). In a passage of lambent sadness Ali evokes the essential polarity of these two men – Chanu and Azad – locked in their respective positions of discomfort with their class and observed by Nazneen, secure in her class position and community:

Nazneen...remembered the night, many years ago, when she had first wondered what brought these two men together. Now, what kept them together was clear. The doctor had status and respect and money, the lack of which caused Chanu to suffer.

But the doctor had no family; none he could speak of without suffering. Chanu had a proper wife, daughters who behaved themselves... And so they entwined their lives to drink from the pools of each other's sadness. From these special watering holes, each man drew his strength. (271)

Against the barren cheerlessness of Azad's lonely middle-class existence and Chanu's ardent struggle for social mobility, Ali pits the cluttered, crowded life of the community. The sense of the community is conveyed through its resilient, resourceful women who negotiate unemployed or poorly paid husbands, uncompanionable marriages and difficult children to come together for each other through labour, conversation and support. While it is the shared memories of home, and the daily joylessness of their lives that brings these women together in gossip and to comfort, what keeps them together and builds a community is their shared and productive labour. They work to supplement their husbands' paltry earnings or to compensate for what money their husbands do not give them and their children. And this work, using traditional skills as seamstresses, in the garment industry in London, so typically specific to the Bangladeshi immigrant community, builds a communitarian space where Nazneen develops her identity. So Nazneen's views are influenced by those of the community of women to which she feels she belongs – her fellow labourers, the other women on the estate. Specifically it is her friendship with Razia, and Razia's agency, that shapes Nazneen's personality:

'I'll get a job myself. I told him straight.' Razia looked at Nazneen, not sideways and skeptically but straight on.

'What kind of job?' said Nazneen...

'I talked to Jorina. There are jobs going in the factory.' (74)

Common labour and common aspirations bring this community of women together with Razia as the fulcrum of that group; and their camaraderie is what Nazneen chooses as her class, space and community location at the end of the novel:

Nazneen gave silent thanks... She prayed to God, but He had already given her what she needed: Razia. (407)

Living on the Margins: The impact of space and location in Nazneen's identity development

Ali uses the concepts of space and location and the ways in which Nazneen inhabits them, to mark the transitions of her character and identity. It is a matter of textual intent that the novel begins in Nazneen's village in Bangladesh, because this space becomes the reference point for Nazneen's angst and loneliness in much of the novel. In fact one of the most striking contrasts of location in the novel is when Ali describes Nazneen's early life in Tower Hamlets in London. This is the time in the novel when Nazneen often travels between her current physical space in London and the spaces of her mind – her recalled memories of her village in Bangladesh:

It was the middle of the day. Nazneen had finished the housework. Soon she would start preparing the evening meal, but for a while she would let the time pass. (6)

Nazneen fell asleep on the sofa. She looked out across jade-green rice fields and swam in the cool dark lake. (9)

It can only be in recalled and reconstructed memory that a village in Bangladesh is perceived to be cooler than London, where the coolness of green fields and dark lakes are codes for peace and contentment whereas hot sun on metal frames is a metaphor for harsh isolation.

Nazneen's sense of claustrophobia and being hemmed in by her surroundings and her life constantly express themselves through a comparison of physical spaces:

Rosemead faces her unblinkingly. There are metal frames on the windows... The frames are dirty, as sullen as their hosts.

You can spread your soul over a paddy field, you can whisper to a mango tree, you can feel the earth beneath your toes and know that this is the place, the place where it begins and ends. But what can you tell to a pile of bricks? The bricks will not be moved. (66)

In fact Ali repeatedly uses the clutter and crowdedness of Nazneen's surroundings – the dingy dreariness of the estate as well as the cramped tawdriness of Nazneen's apartment – to

underline Nazneen's claustrophobic loneliness and her deep unhappiness. Consider the following two descriptions – one of her apartment and the other of Tower Hamlets estate:

The rugs, which she had held out of the window earlier and beaten with a wooden spoon, needed to be put down again. There were three rugs: red and orange, green and purple, brown and blue. The carpet was yellow with a green leaf design. One hundred percent nylon and, Chanu said, very hard-wearing. The sofa and chairs were the colour of dried cowdung...They had little sheaths of plastic on the headrests to protect them from Chanu's hair oil. There was a lot of furniture...There was a low table with a glass top and orange plastic legs, three little wooden tables that stacked together, the big table...a bookcase, a corner cupboard, a rack...a trolley...files and folders...sofa and armchairs...footstools...dining chairs, and a showcase...Nazneen stared at the glass showcase stuffed with pottery animals, china figures, and plastic fruit. Each one had to be dusted... All of it belonged to God. She wondered what He wanted with clay tigers, trinkets, and dust. (8-9)

She walked slowly along the corridor, looking at the front doors. They were all the same. Peeling red paint showing splinters of pale wood... A door flew open and a head bobbed out in front of her. It was bald and red with unknown rage...Nazneen passed with her eyes averted to the wall. Someone had drawn a pair of buttocks in thick black pen, and next to them a pair of breasts with elongated nipples. Behind her a door slammed... The overhead light was fierce...even as the concrete cold crept into her toes. The stairs gave off a tang of urine. She...took the steps two at a time until she missed a ledge and came down on her ankle against an unforgiving ridge...then continued down, stamping as if the pain was just a cramp to be marched out. (37)

In the passages above, Ali is meticulous in her description of the unpleasantness of the spaces in which Nazneen lives. These accounts of joyless surroundings draw the reader's attention to the idea that Nazneen experiences these spaces around her as margins of her existence. It is as if her feelings of loneliness and alienation are bounded by these unpleasant physical spaces that she inhabits and it is pertinent that at the end of the novel, when she is comfortable in her environment, she demonstrates her arrival at her independent identity destination, through her connection with a physical space – the ice-skating rink:

In front of her was a huge white circle... Glinting, dazzling, enchanting ice...

To get on the ice physically – it hardly seemed to matter. In her mind she was already there. (415)

As Nazneen gradually adapts to her life in London and integrates with the community that becomes her point of reference, so she moves away from her memories of her village; and her movement away from it, emotionally, accompanies the manifestation of her individual agency:

The village was leaving her. Sometimes a picture would come. Vivid; so strong she could smell it. More often, she tried to see and could not. (176)

It is pertinent that this realization comes on the heels of a moment of near epiphany, when Nazneen feels that she has the power to give her daughters their happiness and so seek her own, “For one dizzying moment she was flushed with power: she would make it right for the girls” (175).

The manner in which Nazneen engages with her physical space becomes an allegory for her state of mind. So on one of her early sojourns into the city near Brick Lane (35-43) when she is pregnant and decides to take a walk to escape from the demons of her emotions, she walks aimlessly, and gets lost. This act implies the loss of direction of Nazneen’s life as she had known it, the loss of her familiars, the loss of comfort and the loss of certainty. But as Nazneen weaves and wends her way through the traffic and course of the city, exchanges bare words and looks with strangers, and finds her way back home, she emerges with her first ray of confidence, borne of her encounter with the city. And thus Ali uses space and location to position Nazneen’s feelings of dawning and still tentative comfort:

She was cold, she was tired, she was in pain, she was hungry, and she was lost. She had gotten herself lost because Hasina was lost... She, like Hasina, could not simply go home. They were both lost in cities that would not pause even to shrug... It rained then. And in spite of the rain, and the wind which whipped into her face, and in spite of the pain in her ankle and arm...and in spite of the fact that she was lost and cold and stupid, she began to feel a little pleased. She had spoken, in English, to a stranger,

and she had been understood and acknowledged. It was very little. But it was something. (41-43)

What is perhaps even more significant is that this act of getting lost and finding her way and engaging with her space gives Nazneen the legitimacy in her own mind to challenge Chanu. So, when on her return home from this expedition, she brings up the question of Hasina with Chanu and asks him to go to Dhaka to find her, and Chanu ridicules her suggestion, Ali allows Nazneen to acknowledge her rebellion:

Anything is possible. She wanted to shout it. Do you know what I did today? I went inside a pub. To use the toilet. Did you think I could do that? I walked mile upon mile... And to get home again I went to a restaurant. I found a Bangladeshi restaurant and asked directions. See what I can do! ...[H]er heart...was ablaze, with mutiny. (45)

The culmination of this space-identity link occurs when Nazneen goes out into a hostile city, in the middle of a race riot, to search for her daughter (392-400). As she negotiates firearms and rioters and hoodlum violence, as she tries to help a fellow person caught in the violence and assists instead of seeking assistance, she recognizes and acknowledges her own strength of character and growth, “How long, she thought, how long it has taken me to get this far?” (397). Ali uses the metaphor of Nazneen gaining control of her physical space (triumphing over the hazards of the riots on the estate and succeeding in finding her daughter), to express the idea that Nazneen is finally taking charge of her life. So that when she finally finds her daughter, it is a homecoming – for her long journey to her own destination, “Shahana. Shahana. It’s me. I’m here. Amma’s come.” (400).

Islam as Faith and as Politics: The role of religion in *Brick Lane*

Ali maps Nazneen’s changing engagement with religion as a marker of her strengthening voice and individuality in the novel *Brick Lane*. Through the early part of the novel, Nazneen’s relationship with her religion is uncritical, belonging in the realm of feeling rather than thought, as she seeks her faith in the same way as she seeks the memories of her village – to assuage her homesickness and to find familiarity in its rituals:

As Nazneen grew she heard many times this story of How You Were Left to Your Fate... So when Rupban advised Nazneen to be still in her heart and mind, to accept the Grace of God, to treat life with the same indifference with which it would treat her, she listened closely. (4)

This link of fate and faith determines Nazneen's relationship with her religion. For much of the early part of the novel, Nazneen keeps turning to her religious practice to quell any stirrings of resentment or rebellion that she feels. She uses her faith to vindicate her fate: to underline her belief that in living the life she has been given, she is submitting to the will of God; and thus she prevents herself from railing against her fate. When she is given away in marriage to a stranger and sent away from her home and village to a foreign land and a life of loneliness, unhappiness and dissatisfactions, she finds refuge in the words and prayers of her faith:

She could spend another day alone. It was only another day...

She left the window open. Standing on the sofa to reach, she picked up the Holy Qur'an from the high shelf... Then she selected a page at random and began to read...

The words calmed her stomach and she was pleased. (8)

And then, because she had let her mind drift and become uncentred again, she began to recite in her head from the Holy Qur'an one of the suras she had learned in school. She did not know what the words meant but the rhythm of them soothed her. (9)

One of the most telling passages in the novel describing Nazneen's immigrant, lonely life in London is also a marker against which her later development can be mapped, and places Nazneen's relationship with her faith at the core of her existence, "Regular prayer, regular housework... She told her mind to be still. She told her heart, *Do not beat with fear, do not beat with desire* (35)."

It is one of the deep ironies of the novel that Nazneen's intellectual and critical engagement with her faith begins when she embarks on her adulterous affair; in other words when she allows her heart to beat with desire. In a sense, Ali links the two passions in

Nazneen's life – her faith and her affair –to establish the emergence of Nazneen's distinct voice. It is Karim, her lover, who introduces Nazneen to the idea of political Islam, and it is through this forbidden relationship, through its illegitimate thrill and desire, that Nazneen discovers her own voice, views and agency, overall, but also with regard to her religion:

He began to talk to her about the world. She encouraged him... His knowledge shamed her. She learned about her Muslim brothers and sisters. She learned how many there were, how scattered and how tortured. She discovered Bosnia... He shamed her. And he excited her... He left Bengali newsletters for her. One was called *The Light*; another was simply titled *Ummah*. Chanu had never given her anything to read...Those next few days, reading became a sweet and melancholy secret, caressing the phrases with her eyes, feeling Karim there, just beyond the words. (198)

It is interesting that while Karim is her teacher in this respect, Nazneen's views develop differently from Karim's. While she attends the meetings of the Islamic group that Karim sets up, the Bengal Tigers, and listens attentively to Karim's passionate views and those of the other participants at the meetings regarding Muslim rights and culture and protecting the local *ummah* and supporting the global *ummah* (196), her views are less radical, more inclusive:

A couple of seats to the right of Chanu, a girl jumped up and shouted over him... 'According to the United Nations statistics, there was another big tragedy on September eleventh. On that day thirty-five thousand children also died through hunger.'...

'How many were Muslims?' called a voice from the front of the hall...

What does it matter? thought Nazneen. Those who were not Muslims, would they be any less dead? (349)

Ali uses religion as a literary trope to draw the difference between Nazneen's relationship with her husband and her relationship with her lover and the role that religion plays as a signifier of passion. Throughout the novel, Chanu maintains his distance from Nazneen's emotional dependence on, and overt observance of, Islam; through this, Ali signifies his emotional indifference to Nazneen's state of being:

She began to pray five times each day... She was pleased with the order it gave to her day, and Chanu said it was a good thing. 'But remember,' he said...'rubbing ashes on your face doesn't make you a saint. God sees what is in your heart.' And Nazneen hoped it was true, because Chanu never to her knowledge prayed, and of all the books that he held in his hand she had never once seen him with the Holy Qur'an. (27)

Karim, on the other hand, suffuses Nazneen's space with his religious fervour. When this is combined with his intense physicality and Nazneen's desire for him, religion and lust become entwined, as do her self-worth and intelligence:

In the sitting room, in the small space behind the sofa and in front of the door, she rolled out her prayer mat...

He put his right hand over his left on his chest... She tried to stop the prayer words forming on her lips. To pray with an unrelated man, it was not permitted...

'Glory and praise be to You, O God...'

She heard the blood pound in her heart and she trembled because he would surely hear it...

He bowed, hands on knees, straight back. She saw how well he moved. Twice more. It was he who moved, but she who felt dizzy. (190)

And he prayed in her home several more times. As he took the mat from her, the tips of their fingers found each other and she smelled the crisp smell of his shirt.

The smell of limes. (199)

Nazneen's affiliation with her faith is one of the most significant spaces in which Ali demonstrates her protagonist's growth in confidence and sense of self. As she manages her relationship with her lover, she develops her own ideas about race, culture and religion through her exposure to his politics while retaining an independent and separate view, different and more grounded from the passions around her. So when Karim expostulates about Muslims and their condition and Chanu agitates about race, she thinks:

Only my husband and this boy [Karim] are thinking all the time about New York and terrorists and bombs. Everybody else just living their lives. (319)

Her increasing belief in her own views enables Nazneen to steer her relationship with her husband and lover with greater authority, with less adherence to fate and with more confidence in herself. Consider the following passage, for example, which is set at one of the meetings of the Bengal Tigers, run by Karim and which she is attending with Chanu:

Sitting next to her husband, in front of her lover, she gave way to a feeling of satisfaction that had been slowly growing. It began at the edges and worked its way in so that eventually it found its way to her heart and warmed it... She considered how much of her life, how much time, how much energy she had spent trying not to care, trying to *accept*. (294)

What Ali is drawing attention to here is Nazneen's recognition of what she has achieved by finally refusing to accept her fate and by determining her fate herself. This she does with particular courage and ingenuity at the end of the novel, when she rescues her daughter from the race riots on the estate and comes through them with her family intact. So at the end while she finds her voice strengthened by her encounter with her religion and its politics, her fate is determined by her faith in herself; and in the ultimate analysis, she determines how she will live.

Marriage, Love and Desire in *Brick Lane*

The two men who inform and influence Nazneen's identity development in *Brick Lane* are her husband, Chanu and her lover, Karim. The striking points of contrast in the relationships are the sexuality, physicality and intellectual engagement (which she shares with her lover) versus the tolerance, understanding and ultimately compassion that she feels towards her husband.

Nazneen's early relationship with her husband is defined by her rigidly suppressed physical revulsion towards him along with her extreme loneliness and homesickness and his utter lack of emotional companionship towards her. The young Nazneen finds her husband physically unattractive and emotionally self-absorbed and yet she believes that she must make her life alongside him, as best she can, tolerating his daily presence and his role in her life:

After a minute or two in the dark, when her eyes had adjusted and the snoring began, Nazneen turned on her side and looked at her husband. She scrutinized his face, round as a ball, the blunt-cut thinning hair on top, and the dense eyebrows that crawled across his brow. His mouth was open and she began to regulate her breathing so that she inhaled as he did. When she got it wrong she could smell his breath. She looked at him for a long time. It was not a handsome face. In the month before her marriage...she thought it ugly. Now she saw that it was not handsome, but it was kind...

Nazneen got out of bed and crossed the hall...she thought about Hasina and tried to imagine what it would be like to fall in love. (25-26)

He [Chanu] folded his arms so they rested on the shelf of his belly. She could hear him breathe, and then he began to hum... Every particle of skin on her body prickled with something more physical than loathing. It was the same feeling she had when she used to swim in the pond and came up with a leech stuck to her leg or her stomach. (44)

Ali further highlights the lack of chemistry between Nazneen and Chanu by including into Nazneen's relationship with him acts of personal grooming that she must perform for him, which she clearly finds distasteful:

Before they went out today, she had to cut his hair. She was always cutting bits off him. The dead skin around his corns. His toenails. The fingernails of his right hand, because his left hand could not do the job properly. The fingernails of his left hand, because she might as well do that while she had the scissors. The wiry hair that grew from the tops of his ears. And the hair on his head, once every six weeks, when Chanu said, 'Better smarten me up a bit.' (69)

It is shared sorrow that brings Chanu closer to Nazneen when their infant son Raqib is taken ill and dies and almost the first moments of honest companionship that Nazneen feels towards him begin in the hospital, where they both attend to their son:

Nazneen sat and watched her son, and watched her husband rattling around the place...

Her irritation with her husband, instead of growing steadily as it had for three years, began to subside. For the first time she felt that he was not so different. At his core, he was the same as her. (94)

The pattern of companionship and understanding with Chanu continues as Nazneen gives birth to her two daughters and runs her family with her daughters at its core. Into this rhythm Ali introduces Karim, with his youthful physicality, and Nazneen's long dormant sexuality which never found play with Chanu, is now unleashed with Karim:

Her [Nazneen's] fingers trembled and she could not work. Karim squeezed the back of his neck. He closed his eyes. His right leg vibrated up and down. When Chanu fidgeted he showed his unease. When Karim could not be still, he showed his energy. For a few moments she drifted helplessly on a tide of longing. (215)

And when she could keep him out no longer she thought of Karim. She thought about his forearms and she rejoiced that they were not thin. She thought about the small flat mole on the left ridge of his jaw... She thought about his certainty... And most of all she thought of what he had that she and Hasina and Chanu sought but could not find. The thing that he had and inhabited so easily. A place in the world. (216)

Nazneen embarks on a torrid affair with Karim and her relationship with him is defined by desire: not only her physical desire but her hunger to engage her mind. Her affair with Karim helps her to find self esteem; because she is desired for her body but also because Karim engages her intellectually. For Karim this fits his compulsion to talk about his religious and political views and mould her to them. Nazneen, through her guilt and anxiety and remorse about her affair, nevertheless discovers her sense of self:

In the bedroom everything changed. Things became more real and they became less real. Like a Sufi in a trance, a whirling dervish, she lost the thread of one existence and found another...

Out of the bedroom, she was – in starts – afraid and defiant... She had submitted to her father and married her husband; she had submitted to her husband. And now she gave herself up to a power greater than these two, and felt herself helpless before

it...the thought crept into her mind that the power was inside her, that she was its creator...

Sometimes she fell into a state of bottomless anxiety...

But much of the time she felt good... It was as if the conflagration of her bouts with Karim had cast a special light on everything, a dawn light after a life lived in twilight. It was as if she had been born deficient and only now been gifted the missing sense. (247-248)

Ironically, as Nazneen's affair progresses, so her relationship with her husband achieves new levels of understanding and maturity. This is driven in part by Nazneen's strengthening role in her family as income earner and manager of family relations (she is always the buffer and the interlocutor between her daughters and Chanu), and partly by Chanu's unspoken realization of Nazneen's affair and his understanding of his own failure, but also by his appreciation of Nazneen and her spirit, resilience, intelligence and grace in making a family for him:

'I haven't been what you would call a perfect-type husband,' he told his knees. 'Nor a perfect-type father.'

He had shrunk...

'But I haven't been a bad husband. Would you say? Not bad.' Chanu looked at her and squinted as if her face was too bright to behold directly...

'It was lucky for me' – her heart swelled as she spoke – 'that my father chose an educated man.' (386)

Nazneen develops compassion and understanding for her husband and his failed ambitions, while at the same time recasting her relationship with him through the expression of her voice and views. It is at this point too, that she determines to end her relationship with Karim, even as he prepares to marry her. While her affair with him mines new resources in her and helps her to uncover her individuality and strength, with passion spent, it is Nazneen, not Karim, who realizes that their relationship was based on their conceptions of what they desired and not on who they really were:

She touched his hand for the last time. 'Oh Karim... But always there was a problem between us. How can I explain? I wasn't me, and you weren't you. From the very beginning to the very end, we didn't see things. What we did – we made each other up.' (382)

At the end of the novel Ali has Nazneen discovering love in a marriage without desire, and desire in an affair without love – and recognizing and accepting this as part of her journey of discovery and being. The two men, alpha players to begin with in their separate relationships with Nazneen, at the end take their lead from her, and allow her to draw the parameters of their emotional engagements.

In Conclusion: Voice and identity in *Brick Lane*

Six months now since she'd been sent away to London. Every morning before she opened her eyes she thought, *If I were the wishing type, I know what I would wish...* Was it cheating... Was it not the same as making the wish? If she knew what the wish would be, then somewhere in her heart she had already made it. (7)

The half-expressed, half-stifled longings of the above paragraph are the leitmotif of Nazneen's mute unhappiness as she begins to live her life in Brick Lane in London. Her loneliness expresses itself, not through her voice, but through imagined imprisonings:

Sometimes she dreamed the wardrobe had fallen on her, crushing her on the mattress. Sometimes she dreamed she was locked inside it and hammered and hammered but nobody heard. (12)

But she journeys from these unvoiced feelings to her realization at the end of the novel that she is in a space where she is able to express her voice, views and life, "How long, she thought, how long it has taken me to get this far?" (397). While Nazneen is referring here to her ability to negotiate the rioting mobs and to her decision about building a life for herself and her daughters in England, as readers we know that the distance that she has travelled includes financially and emotionally supporting her family, building a community of

friendships, facilitating her husband's departure to his homeland, rescuing her daughter from rioting mobs and her husband and family from the clutches of a greedy usurer, releasing her lover from his own unrealistic expectations and taking control of her life.

Nazneen's course from muteness to voice traverses a number of terrains the most significant being her relationship with her daughters, her work as a seamstress, her participation in Karim's politics and her friendships with the women on the estate, notably Razia but also the other garment workers. Another factor that also legitimizes her unspoken rebellion against her husband is what she considers his callousness towards her sister Hasina's plight in Dhaka; and it is Chanu's apathy towards any positive intervention for Hasina that shores up Nazneen's resolve to deal with it on her own and thus strengthens her agency on this and other issues. These engagements compel Nazneen to confront her customary fatalism and her belief that her own life was nothing "but a series of gnawings, ill-defined and impossible to satisfy" (62).

As her daughters' expectations collide with Chanu's, Nazneen is the steadying influence against her daughter's hostility towards their father and Chanu's inept and futile remonstrances against his daughters:

Nazneen thought about it now as she undressed. The eternal three-way torture of daughter-father-daughter. How they locked themselves apart at this very close distance. Bibi, silently seeking approval, always hungry. Chanu, quivering with his own needs, always offended. Shahana, simmering in – worst of all things – perpetual embarrassment, implacably angry. It was like walking through a field of snakes. Nazneen was worried at every step... It was up to her to balance the competing needs, to soothe here and urge there, and push the day along to its close. (165)

Nazneen's love for her daughters, as well her conception of her traditional role as home-maker, compel her to facilitate the relationship between her daughters and her husband and thus keep her family together. But this role of enabler of relationships is visited upon her by her immigrant circumstances, where her London-born daughters remain in constant conflict with their immigrant father and his differing views of life and living. It is the

fulfillment of this changing role in her family, that allows her to move away from her passive acceptance of fate to determining her family's and thus her own, future.

This is of course enhanced by the fact that she also takes on the role of earning for her family. Once again it is the immigrant circumstances and her particular class location that open up this opportunity for her. Like the other garment workers whose traditional skills allow them to seek an income that is crucial to their families, so also Chanu's lack of employment, along with his desire to return home, forces him to consider this income opportunity for Nazneen. In so doing, he becomes her middleman, assisting her as she becomes the primary bread winner and then supporting her as he gets a job to complement her income.

Nazneen's income gives her increased voice within her family by giving her a stake in deciding how to manage the finances – from paying off their debts to sending money to Hasina to buying indulgences for her daughters. Her labour strengthens her existing networks with her friends, the community of women who are also producing the same labour as she is and with whom she aligns herself eventually.

Nazneen's affair with Karim not only awakens her sexuality but also her intellectual and critical thinking as she gets involved in his political meetings and influences her family to participate in them as well. This in turn enhances her self-esteem and she begins to acknowledge her own desires and expectations and aspirations.

It is these multiple terrains of income, community, class and home, encircled by the immigrant experience of dislocation and difference, that determine Nazneen's identity. Through this process, she locates her agency and her voice and defines her engagements with her husband, lover, family, daughters and community.

It is pertinent here, to compare the two points of Nazneen's journey, one at the beginning of the novel, when her mother bequeaths Nazneen the life lesson that remains her mantra for much of the novel – to accept her fate without fighting it (3) and thus remain mute – and the other at the end of the novel, when Nazneen, having chosen her life, determines her own fate and tells her daughters, "we'll decide what to do" (404). This

comparison reveals the course that Nazneen has travelled from muteness to voice. It is a journey that has been brought about by her migrant situation and the resources that she has had to build to deal with that. Her confidence in stating at the end that nothing else matters but what she and her daughters want, is the powerful expression of agency that is the subject of the novel.

Chapter 4

Unities, Disunities and Common Causes: A comparison of the themes and interests in *Brick Lane* and *The Namesake*

The novels *Brick Lane* and *The Namesake* both deal primarily with the notion of created, malleable identities. The characters of Ashima and Nazneen demonstrate that identity is not imposed or intrinsic but rather ‘constructed’ and ‘negotiated’ within a context. In this chapter I will juxtapose the two novels and discuss the ways in which Nazneen’s and Ashima’s experiences are similar or different, in creating their identities in the new worlds.

Brick Lane and *The Namesake* are both novels of the Indian diaspora, written by authors who are diasporics themselves. Both novels present immigration as an ultimately empowering experience but both also draw their substance from the brutal alienation that the protagonists suffer in the act of creating their new interstitial selves.

Monica Ali’s *Brick Lane* and Jhumpa Lahiri’s *The Namesake* chronicle the lives of two women who are reluctant immigrants by marriage but who navigate the ‘un-belonging’ and ‘in-betweenness’ of their stark, lonely lives, to make singular contributions to the idea that women’s immigrant identity can be potentially creative, critical and liberating.

Class and its Concerns in the Two Novels

Nazneen, Ali’s reluctant wife and Ashima, Lahiri’s pliant, immigrant bride, both pine for their absent homes in the Motherland. Sapped by the intense loneliness and utter alienation of their new marital homes, they turn to the different metropolitan groupings that exist in their new homelands and to which they are driven by their class locations. For Ashima, this is the public library where she volunteers and the expatriate Bengali community who become her friends; and for Nazneen, it is the company of Razia and the other garment workers. These create collectives of women for them, to which they ultimately choose to belong and determine the identity journeys that they follow. Ashima, the wife of a middle-class professional, is mobile, travelling back and forth between countries, and opts for this nomadic

borderlessness as her final identity. Nazneen, the wife of a working-class migrant, cannot travel beyond her ghetto in Brick Lane in London and creates her home and community there. Ashima's and Nazneen's different class contexts shape their idea of 'home'. Ashima, financially and socially secure, chooses an individual, conceptual 'home' across two continents; Nazneen, the working class woman, stays back in London with her daughters and friends, for a sisterhood defined by social and economic solidarity. In choosing to 'stay', rather than 'return', she expresses her preference for her independent, immigrant, communitarian identity over that of her prescribed, married one.

In Lahiri's text, Ashima is married to Ashoke, a genteel, educated man whose class capital is derived from his education, training, upbringing and profession. Ashoke's grandfather introduces him to Russian literature:

'Read all the Russians, and then reread them,' his grandfather had said.

'They will never fail you.' (Lahiri 2004:12)

This adage comes home to roost when, after a horrendous train accident; the fluttering page of the Russian novel in Ashoke's hand attracts the rescue workers' attention and so saves him:

Instead of thanking God he thanks Gogol, the Russian writer who had saved his life. (21)

Ashoke spends his recuperation after the accident reading and studying in preparation for his decision to leave his homeland. This decision is determined by his desire to pursue a career in knowledge and teaching, away from the place where he nearly lost his life. He names his first-born son, born in America, the land that Ashoke adopts, after the Russian novelist, Gogol. Lahiri thus makes Ashoke's erudition a critical part of his persona and assures him the place that he occupies in middle-class professional academic life in the US.

This is the life that Ashima walks into when she marries Ashoke. Lahiri situates Ashima's extreme loneliness within this life; Ashima befriends others like herself but continues to live a suburban, middle-class family life with its attendant alienations. Although she builds a community, it is one of suburban expatriates like herself, and so when she is faced with the choice of making her home, she opts to live partly in that suburban space and partly in the familiarity of her homeland.

In contrast, Ali's Nazneen is married to a little-educated, striving, poor immigrant, who comes to London to escape the poverty of his village and whose futile aspirations for social mobility are predicated on his belief in his command of the English language (which is inadequate) and his faith in his education (which is spare and inconsistent):

'Within months I will be a fully fledged academic, with two degrees. One from a British University. Bachelor of Arts degree. With Honours... Of course when I have my Open University degree then nobody can question my credentials. Although Dhaka University is one of the best in the world these people here are by and large ignorant and know nothing of the Brontes or Thackeray.' (Ali 2008:20, 24-25)

Nazneen, whose location is determined by her husband's low paid, working-class job, thus joins the community of working class immigrants in Brick Lane and finds her space in that community through labour and belonging.

The different class backgrounds that the two protagonists have in these two novels determine their life choices – to stay and make a home within the ghetto community of Bangladeshi migrant workers (Ali's Nazneen) and to live across countries, travelling between homes (Lahiri's Ashima).

Nazneen's class background does not allow her to live outside of the ghetto that is Brick Lane. As a poor, working-class, immigrant wife, she does not have the choice to go back and forth between her birth home and her adopted one. Her choice is stark – she either stays on in the ghetto, to build an independent life of her own based on her own labour, with her daughters and surrounded by her friends, or she accompanies her foolish, struggling husband back to the homeland, to an uncertain future and circumscribed life. She chooses the ghetto, with its promise of community, shared labour and income and the space to create an independent, creative identity.

Ashima's class background predetermines her solitary identity; she has friends, family and community but they are on the periphery, to be communicated with at her behest. Her identity creation is contingent on her separation from her family, in building an independent, creative but solitary life, lived in a conceptual rather than a physical space. In fact she sells off her physical house only to adopt other people's homes across countries as her 'home'. Nazneen, on the other hand, opts for her tangible and physical home and community in the

adopted land; as opposed to the *idea* of 'returning home' that her husband Chanu decides to follow. Nazneen's security comes from solidarity with the working class community of which she is a part, while Ashima's sense of self is drawn from her solitary independence. This becomes the critical difference, determined by class, that shapes the creation of identity for the two women. Both Ashima and Nazneen reject the idea of 'return'. Implicit in this rejection is the thought that returning is a form of reductionism – not 'going home' but 'going back'. Instead, they opt to stay in the present and between cultures, crafting inter-spatial, plural identities, of choice and agency.

Food, Familiarity and Identity in the Two Novels

In describing Ashima's struggle with her identity, Lahiri frequently uses food as a metonym for homesickness. Ashima acts out most of her life in the kitchen and home; it is in this space, through her cooking, that Ashima tries to summon the memory of familiar tastes and smells and through this process, to create a sense of normality to combat her feelings of alienation. Through the novel *The Namesake*, food occupies a significant role in the narration of Ashima's identity creation. She cooks elaborate feasts and creates community through her celebrated parties:

It is the day before Christmas. Ashima Ganguli sits at her kitchen table, making mincemeat croquettes for a party she is throwing that evening. They are one of her specialties, something her guests have come to expect... She finishes breading the final croquette, then glances at her wristwatch. She is slightly ahead of schedule...The rest of the food has been prepared, sitting in the CorningWare pans on the dining room table: dal coated with a thick skin that will rupture as soon as the first of it is served, a roasted cauliflower dish, eggplant, a korma of lamb. Sweet yogurt and pantuas for dessert sit on the sideboard. She eyes everything with anticipation. Normally cooking for parties leaves her without an appetite, but tonight she looks forward to serving herself, sitting among her guests. (274-277)

Ali too uses food as the bridge across which Nazneen seeks the comfort of the familiar. But in contrast to Ashima's grand, celebratory feasts, Nazneen cooks for the one solitary

guest, Dr Azad, who reluctantly and occasionally dines at her home. These dinners are tentative in their presentation and consumption for both guest (Azad) and hosts (Chanu and Nazneen) as they navigate the awkwardness of their relationship over Nazneen's delicious tastes of the homeland:

She should be getting on with the evening meal. The lamb curry was prepared. She had made it last night with tomatoes and new potatoes. There was chicken saved in the freezer from the last time Dr Azad had been invited but had cancelled at the last minute. There was still the dal to make, and the vegetable dishes, the spices to grind, the rice to wash, and the sauce to prepare for the fish that Chanu would bring this evening. She would rinse the glasses and rub them with newspaper to make them shine. The tablecloth had some spots to be scrubbed out. What if it went wrong? The rice might stick. She might oversalt the dal. Chanu might forget the fish.

It was only dinner. One dinner. One guest. (7-8)

Ashima finds comfort in cooking, eating and preparing feasts for her friends since her culinary repasts form the anchor for her creation of community. But Nazneen's relationship with food is an anxious one; she is always taut with suppressed desires and rebellions and finds rare solace in the act of cooking and eating familiar foods, turning eating into a surreptitious, midnight activity, when she can be alone and undisturbed with her thoughts:

Sometimes she fell into a state of bottomless anxiety. She spent the night eating leftovers in the kitchen as if layer on layer of food inside her would push out the anxiety, displace it like water from a bath. (248)

Lahiri's Ashima shares her eating spaces fulsomely. She cooks for her family, her friends, her children's friends and she cooks to express herself as the fulcrum of her family and community. So when her son, Gogol, brings his girlfriend home, she is diffident but expresses her love for him in the only way she can, through her extravagant cooking:

Along with the samoosas, there are breaded chicken cutlets, chickpeas with tamarind sauce, lamb biryani, chutney made with tomatoes from the garden. It is a meal he knows it has taken his mother over a day to prepare. (148)

Ali's Nazneen refuses to share the pleasure of eating with her husband; she steadfastly denies him the pleasure of communal eating and eats solitarily at night:

Nazneen did not turn on the light. Half a moon, gritty tonight, clung to the dark sky. The linoleum shocked her warm feet. She took a tub of yoghurt from the fridge and sprinkled it with sugar. She leaned against the countertop and ate. 'Eat! Eat!' her husband told her at mealtimes. But for him she would not... It became a habit, then a pleasure, taking solace in these midnight meals. (57-58)

Nazneen's daughters (Shahana and Bibi), who are the primary drivers of Nazneen's decision to eschew her homeland and opt for a life with them in London, are the only people privileged to share the space of her midnight meals. Through allowing this act of complicity, Ali points to the visceral bond that Nazneen has with her daughters:

Nazneen got up in the night and went to the kitchen. She took a Tupperware container from the fridge and ate the curry cold, standing up against the sink...

Bibi stood in the doorway...

'Hungry?' said Nazneen.

Bibi nodded. She came and leaned up against the sink...Bibi pointed to the Tupperware. She ate with Nazneen's spoon, but only managed a mouthful. They spent this time together and they did not waste it by talking. (150)

When Nazneen finally takes the decision to forsake her homeland and her husband and stay behind in London with her daughters, she seeks comfort yet again in her midnight sojourn with the flavours of her home. Once more, her daughters join her in this moment. Ali uses the ritual of a mother and her daughters eating at midnight as a symbol of their collusion, shared aspiration and shared life:

She could not sleep. She got up in the night and went to the kitchen. Nazneen searched for the chopping board. She found her frying pan, a saucepan, knives, spices, onions, and red lentils. She washed the lentils, fished out the stones, covered them with water, and set the pan to boil... She chopped onion, garlic, and ginger, dropped a portion into the lentils, and put the rest in the frying pan with some oil. A teaspoon of cumin, a pinch of turmeric, and some chilli went into the pot...she split eight cardamoms with her teeth to release the little black seeds, and threw them into the frying pan... The spices began to catch and gave off their round and intricate smell. It

was a scent that made all others flat; it existed in spheres, the others in thin circles.

Nazneen leaned over the frying pan...

Nazneen stirred the dal...

The girls came into the kitchen and began the hunt for the rice.

They took their plates into the sitting room and made space on the table...

'When will we go to Dhaka?' said Bibi.

'If we go,' said Shahana. 'We don't have to go. Do we, Amma?' ...

Nazneen...took more rice. She took more dal. She offered more to her daughters...

'We'll decide what to do. Staying or going, it's up to us three.'

(402-404)

Food and the preparation of it also colours the women's relationship with their respective husbands in the two novels. The two husbands, Ashoke in *The Namesake* and Chanu in *Brick Lane*, are both competent cooks, and have clearly lived on their own and cooked for themselves in the adopted land before their wives joined them there. But they do not cook once they are married and their wives come to live with them. However, in both novels, the husbands cook when their wives are incapable of doing so. These acts of duress nevertheless become, for the two husbands, rare moments through which they express their tenderness towards their wives.

In *Brick Lane*, when Nazneen spends night after night at the hospital with her first born, Chanu cooks for her so that she does not have to eat the bland hospital food; and again, when she has a nervous breakdown, Chanu cooks and fusses around her (91-92, 100, 269-271). And in *The Namesake*, Ashoke regularly makes tea for his wife, Ashima, when she is first pregnant, lonely and dispirited (11). Later, when she is pregnant with their daughter, Ashoke cooks and feeds his son, so that Ashima can rest (54-55). Later still Ashoke and Ashima share moments of companionship when he assists Ashima with cooking for her first dinner parties in Cambridge, Massachusetts (274-275).

Food, the cooking of it and the sharing of it, is thus is a leitmotif of identity, self-development and self-expression for both Lahiri's and Ali's heroines. For Lahiri's Ashima it is a

signifier of community, of tastes, smells and flavours that bring people together. For Ali's Nazneen, food, cooking and eating signify both companionship and estrangement. In both novels the cooking and sharing of food is an expression of the 'interior' spaces of their female protagonists – and how they use this space points to their agency and the manner in which they take their contemporary 'exterior' place in society.

Techniques and Tropes: a comparison of the stylistic devices and plot lines in the two novels

Monica Ali uses a deliberate epistolary device in the novel *Brick Lane* to mark time and more importantly to mark the differing tempos of the lives of the two sisters, Nazneen and Hasina. Hasina 'chooses' her life. In an apparent act of self-will and rebellion, she elopes with her lover and finds herself in the exploited underbelly of life in the city of Dhaka, in Bangladesh, sans the necessary resources to lift herself out of it. Nazneen submits to her father's will and an arranged marriage with a man she has never met, and finds herself living a hard, alien but ultimately independent life in London. Hasina is presented as a romantic, and while she expresses capacity for decision-making, her lack of education and skills subject her to a life of unending misery where she is exploited ceaselessly by the men in her life. Nazneen is submissive but she subverts her seeming compliance to establish an independent identity and life in a manner that Hasina does not. Ali uses the epistolary technique to highlight this difference in the two sisters' lives. Hasina writes long, news-filled letters to Nazneen about her life of trials and subjugation; it is also through these letters that we learn of the passage of time in Nazneen's life (116-141). Ali presents these letters in broken, grammatically poor English in what appears to be Hasina's original voice:

Today is hartal again. Some mens here sway in hammocks chew pan and spitting. Most gone for rally. Mr Chowdhury say all these strikers lazy like hell and only making holidays. But all and everything shut down on hartal day so I write everything coming to mind. (117)

Critics have argued about the language and voice in these letters. Alistair Cormack observes:

Without any account by the narrator, it is hard to know exactly what we are reading – whether the letters represent inept attempts at English or are a free translation from illiterate Bengali. (Cormack 2006:715)

We never read Nazneen's responses but Ali herself offers an explanation for her use of the particular grammar:

Whenever she got a letter from Hasina... The letters were long and detailed. Nazneen composed and recomposed her replies until the grammar was satisfactory, all errors expunged along with any vital signs. But Hasina kicked aside all such constraints: her letters were full of mistakes and bursting with life. (71-72)

Ali deliberately uses a literary trope – the awkwardly worded letters – to present Hasina's ebullience as a foil to Nazneen's apparent muteness. As readers, we are guided to thus view Nazneen's stoic composure as a counterpoint to Hasina's tumultuous outpourings. But in spite of Hasina's passionate voice and seeming independence, she is a victim of her circumstances whereas Nazneen acquires and expresses agency through a gradual process. Ultimately hers is the real rebellion – both in terms of her affair with Karim and her decision to stay on in London as a single, independent woman.

The world that Ali presents in *Brick Lane* is a sordid one, peopled by loan sharks (Mrs Islam), futile aspirations and relentless failure (Chanu), unhappy and uncomfortable immigrants (Dr Azad and his wife), overflowing garbage bins, peeling paint and unkempt council housing (Tower Hamlets), suicides (14-15), lonely lunatics (The Tattoo lady), drug addicts (Razia's son), affairs (Nazneen's with Karim), riots (393-400), and the gross quotidian of Nazneen's life (cutting off bits of Chanu – his nails, his corns, the tufts of hair in his ears and nose, etc). This squalor is offset only by the irrepressible spirit and indomitable friendships of the community of women in Tower Hamlets whom Nazneen befriends, starting with Razia. For Ali's women in Tower Hamlets, community spirit triumphs over the dinginess of their loveless marriages and the harshness of their lives in the ghetto, so that they build lives of independent choice and income, rooted in their sense of community with each other.

In contrast, Lahiri's world in *The Namesake* is bland, except for the affair that Gogol's wife Moushumi, Ashima's daughter-in-law, has with Dimitri (262-267). In Lahiri's novel, Ashoke goes from success to success and Ashima lives in pristine suburbs and surrounds

herself with middle-class Bengali friends, for whom she throws convivial, joyful parties. Her children are well educated, affluent and while they go through their phases of alienation from their parents, are ultimately caring and loving. Her community of American women friends from the library is like herself – older, genteel and suburban. In Gogol's girlfriend Maxine's family (130-143), Lahiri presents a sketch of an affluent, upper-class, cultured, New York family that Ashima's son, Gogol, aspires to and is temporarily part of. In allowing this access, Lahiri makes a statement about the class mobility that Gogol has – both because of his own social capital but also derived from his parents. Ashima's sadness therefore is located in a deeply personal space; her sense of alienation is her own, not shared by anyone else. She does not have the solidarity of the working class community that Nazneen does. In fact, one can argue that Ashima's affluence isolates her. Therefore, when she makes her own life choices at the end, unlike Nazneen, she places herself within a solitary space where she is the sole actor, with family and friends on the periphery, to reach out to when she chooses. Nazneen opts for a life of community and Ashima, a life of individuality.

Lahiri and Ali approach the sexuality of their women very differently: Nazneen's is a smouldering, repressed sexuality to Ashima's almost ascetic asexuality. While Ashima and Ashoke share deep regard and companionship for each other and even fleeting moments of tenderness, there is no mention of Ashima's lust or passion towards her husband. Ali's Nazneen regards her husband Chanu as a good man but pathetic and faintly ridiculous. His pompous protestations at home with regard to his ambitions and aspirations are belied by his absolute lack of success in achieving them. He is ineffectual socially, in his relationship with Dr Azad, his colleagues and superiors at work and his passengers when he becomes a taxi driver. He is naïve enough to be hopelessly exploited by the ruthless loan shark, Mrs Islam, till Nazneen confronts her. Physically he is ugly ("he had a face like a frog" (11)), overweight, unprepossessing and twenty-two years older than Nazneen. Nazneen's sexuality finally finds its expression in her tempestuous affair with Karim and in the aftermath of that experience her feelings towards Chanu evolve from mute tolerance, suppressed revulsion and quiet contempt to compassion, understanding and love. They are complicit in their acceptance of each other's failings; he of her affair and her decision to leave him and she of his inability to

make a life for himself. This knowledge of each other is what brings them together and keeps them apart at the end.

Ashima's husband is personable, gentle, ambitious, successful and kind. Her relationship with him is one of tenderness, love and companionship but always underlined by her loneliness and sense of 'uprootedness'. Unlike Nazneen, Ashima's life is circumspect; there are no unruly emotions. She and Ashoke are in a pleasant, respectful marriage, they are companionable with each other, and their children are distant but good to them. There is only the constant theme of solitariness; initially imposed on Ashima by her circumstances of migration, then heightened by Ashoke's death and finally chosen as a preferred way of life.

Lahiri's Ashima remains perpetually solitary, bound by her class and space; Ali's Nazneen opts for sisterhood and solidarity, determined by her life and circumstances of the ghetto. Stylistically the two novels echo this difference. *The Namesake* is peopled with tidy lives lived in genteel spaces; the angst when it exists, comes from the loneliness of its characters. *Brick Lane* is full of repressed and subtle rebellions, unfulfilled desires and irrepressible friendships. Both novels articulate their diasporic authors' conceptions of identity, which lives through difference and by recognizing simultaneous planes of existence.

Both Ashima and Nazneen adopt the notion of living concurrently in two spheres of existence but they do it differently. Ashima does this through her ongoing struggle with her borderless existence; Nazneen does so by coming to terms with her decision not to return to her origins. Their circumstances compel Nazneen and Ashima to create their identities through the dialogue between their desire for their origins and the reality of the history through which they live; and it is through this that they represent the creative, new world of the hybrid.

Chapter 5

Conclusion

Monica Ali's *Brick Lane* and Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake* are acts of fiction that are concerned with the ways in which identity may be altered and realized in fictional spaces. Both writers are subjects of a postcolonial world of diasporic migrations, and as diasporics themselves, they are motivated by an idea of identity that travels deliberately between cultures and that is experientially learned rather than inherent.

The two protagonists in the novels, Nazneen and Ashima, are presented as initially hapless and helpless in the grip of the massive change that their marriages lead them to but gradually they become interested and creative agents, who stretch, change, adapt and modify their individual circumstances and thereby embark on a course of identity-making.

In the novels, Lahiri and Ali create characters, situations and circumstances that they are familiar with. While it may be an overstatement to say that the novels are autobiographical, they are, nevertheless dependent on the 'facts' of biography, and are fictional transformations of the authors' experiences, either real or imagined. For example, in an article in the *Guardian*, Ali writes:

Brick Lane is in many ways a typical first novel, drawing on concerns and ideas that were shaped by my childhood. For instance, there's a lot of me in Shahana, the rebellious teenage daughter, and maybe a bit of Shahana still left in me... Why did I write about Nazneen? I think, but I cannot be sure, that the source was my mother. (Ali 2007)

Similarly, in an interview with the online magazine *About.com* Lahiri says:

When I began writing fiction seriously, my first attempts were, for some reason, always set in Calcutta, which is a city I know quite well as a result of repeated visits with my family, sometimes for several months at a time. These trips, to a vast, unruly, fascinating city so different from the small New England town where I was raised, shaped my perceptions of the world and of people from a

very early age... *The Namesake* is, essentially, a story about life in the United States, so the American setting was always a given. The terrain is very much the terrain of my own life – New England and New York, with Calcutta always hovering in the background. (Lahiri n.d.)

Nazneen and Ashima both share the classic ‘insider’/‘outsider’ perspectives of immigrants and both narrate the experiences of alterity. The lived difference of their lives alters even their physical spaces; thus Brick Lane in London (Ali) and Cambridge in Massachusetts (Lahiri), which are initially depicted as alien, are, through the course of the novels, transformed into spaces chosen as homes by the protagonists. Indeed it could be argued that it is precisely Nazneen’s and Ashima’s positions as ‘insiders’/‘outsiders’ that permit the double-consciousness which allows them to cross borders of various kinds.

The idea of choosing an identity, defined by context and culture, rather than inheriting one, is increasingly finding support among contemporary social thinkers who are themselves products of this hybridization. Nobel Laureate economist, humanist and diasporic, Amartya Sen, suggests that:

History and background are not the only way of seeing ourselves and the groups to which we belong...identities are robustly plural, and...the importance of one identity need not obliterate the importance of others. (Sen 2006:19)

While this may be seen as an argument from a position of privilege, since many people in the world cannot think to pick, choose and pluralize their identities at will, it is this notion of plurality that Lahiri and Ali use to frame the growing agency of their protagonists. The heroines in the two novels, through their experience of exile, develop the consciousness that their identities are less a matter of origin and more an issue of choice.

Sen suggests that “substantial freedom” is necessary to decide “what priority to give to the various identities we may simultaneously have... Life is not mere destiny” (38-39). The control of agency over destiny is the trajectory that the authors chart for their two protagonists, building through the novels a narrative of gathering freedom.

Lahiri and Ali speak to their own positions as authors inhabiting interstitial spaces, as much as to those of their characters, when they present identity as a malleable social

construct in their novels. Consequently, the texts reveal identity to be a dynamic performative act through the actions of their lead protagonists. Both novels thematize and enact processes of fictional transformation as Ashima and Nazneen traverse their changing circumstances and move from positions of voiceless passivity to greater self-knowledge and independence.

The relevance of this narrative of identity as a dynamic performative refers to the extent to which the protagonists in the two novels actively construct their own identities through their circumstances of migration. Ashima and Nazneen, far from being the agents of migration, are traumatized migrants; but the experience of migration liberates them from the known and familiar boundaries and enables them to create new, contemporary, cross-cultural identities, shaped by their gender and class location.

This thesis argues that works of diasporic literature, written by women who are diasporics, open up a space where one can view women's identity within the diaspora as a realm of dynamic dialogue. The energy created by that dialogue propels a re-interpretation of gender roles and promotes a gendered vision of diasporic identity.

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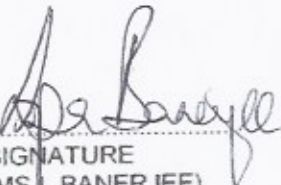
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